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OR,
**BABYLON BILL,
THE HIGH-ROLLER
FROM BRIMSTONE BAR.**

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SPOKANE," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.
BABYLON BILL.

A PROLONGED howl of uproarious guffaws went up from the crowd gathered in front of the stage station in the lively mining town of Shasta.

Instead of the Frisco stage, which was due, and whose expected coming had drawn the idle element together, there came in sight, in the dusty, rocky street, a robust, long-limbed

THE HIGH-ROLLER QUICKLY RECOVERED HIS EQUILIBRIUM AND CAST OFF THE LARIAT.

giant of a fellow, mounted in the most comical manner on a diminutive mountain burro.

The man was tied astride of the burro, with his nose toward its tail. His hands were bound behind his back, and a cord that went around his waist held his legs together beneath the burro's body.

Yet such was his length of limb that, even with his legs half drawn up in this manner, his feet dragged in the dust.

Turning the angle and getting a good view of the screaming crowd, the burro stopped stock still. Then it elevated its head, stretched its wispy tail straight out behind, and gave vent to a deafening bray.

The look of disgust on the face of the giant deepened. He twisted half around, glanced at the crowd and then at the burro.

"Yes, you brute!" he grumbled. "It's a picnic fer you, but it's a reg'lar funeral fer ye'r uncle."

He had a bony, lugubrious face, with a porcupinish fringe of beard, a big mouth, prominent nose and deep-set eyes. As for clothing, he wore a wide-brimmed Western hat, a Mexican jacket, and corduroy pants tucked into boots of immense size.

"Go on there!" endeavoring to jab its hind legs with his heels.

The burro leaped into the air as if stabbed with a spur, then began to prance and kick like a veritable broncho.

Again the giant looked at the crowd.

"I say, now, good people! Won't some of you come to the rescue of an unfortunate pilgrim that accidentally smashed himself up against hard luck and road-agents? If you won't have mercy on me, hain't they anybody hyar what belongs to the Society fer the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals?"

The doleful expression of his lugubrious face was enough to draw laughter from a rock.

"I'm not beggin' fer my own sake! I kin stand a little thing like this till the cows come home. But they's blisterin' big cactus under the girth of this muel, that's a-stingin' it wuss'n a hatful o' wasps!"

The burro twisted and writhed and gave out another deafening bray. Then it rubbed against a post and seemed on the point of lying down.

"Fer Heaven's sake, gentlemen, hain't they a man hyar what's got a gizzard in him as big as a walunt?"

"Tell us all about it, Babylon," some one shouted.

The giant turned his head and fixed his deep-set eyes on the speaker.

"'Twas the road-agents of the Shasta trail, pardner. They've been skeered of Babylon Bill, the high-roller, ever since he struck this hyar camp; an' droppin' to the opportunity this mornin', they thought they'd do him up. An' they shore done it!"

"Road-agents!" with a snort of disgust. "Thar' hain't airy road-agent what would fool away his time wi' you! I reckon you was drunk, Babylon, an' the boys put up a job on ye!"

Babylon Bill—for so the giant was known in Shasta—viewed the man with withering contempt.

"If you'll say that when I git off'n the deck of this stage, with my hands and feet free, I'll wring ye'r neck like I would a chicken's. You don't know me yit, I reckon. You've still to reelly make the acquaintance of the High Roller, or Bald Hornet, from Brimstone. I carries my stinger in my belt, and it's loaded with ackyfortis and—"

The burro, unable to longer endure the torturing cactus spines, dropped into the dust and tried to roll over.

This brought a roar from the giant and another appeal for assistance.

"Hain't they some one hyar what belongs to the Society fer the Prevention of— Whoa, you brute! Whoa, I say! Confound ye, stop that! You're a-bustin' my best leg into knittin' needles! Take him off, somebody, won't ye? Take him off!"

The appeal did not go unheeded. A woman pushed her way through the yelling crowd and opened a pocket knife as she ran to the help of Babylon Bill.

The crowd fell back, staring, but respectful.

"Ruth Ransom!" was whispered from lip to lip.

She heard their mutterings, and, with a look, rebuked what she considered their heartless cruelty.

She reached Babylon Bill's side almost at a bound, and, with a few quick slashes, set him free. Then she ripped the girth in two, so that the saddle fell from the burro's back.

Thus relieved of its burden and of the spines, the burro scrambled up and ungratefully shook into her face a cloud of dust.

The High Roller was on his feet almost as quickly.

He stretched out his hand and detained her as she sought to turn away.

"I hain't never been much given to believin' in angels, but if you hain't one, then my old eyes an' my young an' thumpin' heart deceives me. I'm the man what went down the Jericho road and fell among thieves, and these hyar howlin' idiots of Shasta air the priests an' the Levites what said, 'Go up, old bald-head. You're no good!' But you're the—"

Ruth Ransom, who was blushing as red as a peony, slipped from his grasp and hurried away through the crowd, followed by his admiring glances.

"Gentlemen, I'm hyar to say that that was a handsome trick, done by the handsomest woman in Californy. I'll marry her, just to pay her for that, see if I don't! Now, if somebody'll only ketch that muel, I'll feel that I've still got some friends left."

He thrust his hands into his pockets, threw back his shoulders, and teetered up and down in front of the crowd, while his eyes sought the man who had jeered at him.

"If that chap still wants to feel the sting of the Bald Hornet from Brimstone Bar, the High Roller's now ready to say that his stinger is in runnin' order and ready fer to accommodate him."

He drew a little knife out of his shirt, where it had been suspended by a string about his neck, and, so secreted, had escaped the notice of the road-agents.

He looked for the man again, and whetted the point of the knife on one of his big boots, but the man seemed to have disappeared or collapsed into silence.

Seeing that no one was to come forward, Babylon Bill dropped the knife out of sight with a bellow of ineffable scorn.

"What I was slingin' you about the road-agents was gospel truth. A half-dozen of 'em straddled my collar up the trail, there, this mornin', and when they'd downed me, they tied me to that critter and sent me adrift. And,"—he threw his shoulders still farther back—"I think I see some of 'em in this hyar crowd, right now."

"I hain't a-goin' to name any names, fer they were cowardly enough to wear masks on their faces, and they's a teeny chance that I might be mistaken. But I think I know 'em. And this I'll say, that any scoundrel what laid his finger on me up there on the trail, I'm willin' to fight hyar or elsewhere, now an' ferever, so help me, Joseph."

It was a defiant challenge, but no one chose to accept it, either because Babylon Bill was wrong in his surmise that some of his assailants stood before him, or the men accused did not want to announce themselves as connected with the terrors of the Shasta trail.

CHAPTER II.

A WOMAN'S DEFIANCE.

As soon as Ruth Ransom got clear of the crowd she turned at right angles from the street and hurried home.

The house to which she went was a cottage of logs, with the bark and the natural wood showing everywhere for rustic effect. It was of comfortable dimensions, and located in a picturesque nook at the edge of the camp, beneath the very shadow of snow-capped Mount Shasta.

Entering the house, she found her father awaiting her in a querulous mood.

"Peter Bendigo is to come soon for his answer."

Robert Ransom looked keenly at his daughter, seeking a reply in the expression of her face rather than in her words.

He was a sallow, dark man, prematurely aged and gray, and with a shadow in his eyes that was lurking and suggestive. He had not been in Shasta a great while and had made few friends while there. He was too uncommunicative and coldly suspicious, and the miners of Shasta passed him by with looks askance.

But there was one man whom he had come to know well. That man was Peter Bendigo, the richest man in the camp, and perhaps the most influential.

"He needn't come for it, then," Ruth Ransom answered, removing her hat and putting it away. "He's already had my answer."

"But I have told him you'd think it over—that you would reconsider your decision. He's very rich, you know, and—and—we need money."

"We don't need any money we can't honestly get!" turning on him with a flashing look. "And, no matter what we need, I'm not going to sell myself to any man for his money. If you have any debts of which you haven't told me, sell the Happy Thought—you're welcome to it—and pay them."

Ransom's face darkened.

"You drive me to tell you the truth, then. It isn't for money. He knows my secret; he knows Charles's secret; he knows all our subterfuges. Our hiding and lying for all these years comes to naught unless his silence can be purchased. And that's what he demands for it. He demands you."

The fingers smoothing the ribbon at her throat trembled just a little and her face whitened.

"He demands your hand and ten thousand dollars. I wonder he did not make it more. But that will keep him still."

"In other words, he wants me and the Happy Thought?"

Ransom nodded.

She turned about and looked at him earnestly and pleadingly.

"Do you really ask this of me, father? Is it necessary? Why can't we defy him to do his worst?"

"You don't know how bad that might be."

"But we can leave here—in the night—and go anywhere. Let him take the Happy Thought, if he wants it. This is a big country, and there are other camps and cities. He couldn't find us."

"Ruth, you don't know what you're talking about. He has found us here, and he'll find us anywhere. I don't think it was an accident. He has been searching for us—for me!"

Her face hardened.

"I won't marry him. Let him do his worst!"

Her father sprang half out of the chair, with a beseeching cry.

"Oh, I've never told you everything. I can't face it. It's worse than you ever dreamed of."

"Much worse!" exclaimed a harsh voice in the doorway.

It was the voice of Peter Bendigo, and father and daughter, as they heard it, started as if a pistol shot had rung out.

Summoning all her resolution, the girl turned on Bendigo with a glance of contempt.

He did not waver under it, but advanced into the room with the step of one who feels his power and is resolved to use it.

Bendigo was lean and wiry, with a face almost as dark as an Indian's, and cunning, evil black eyes.

"It's much worse," he said, halting in the center of the room. "So much worse that you can't say 'no' to me!"

Her face flamed with sudden defiance.

"I won't marry you! I wouldn't, if my own life was at stake. And more: I have friends, and I have money—the yield of my mine. I'll use it. I'll sell the Happy Thought, and I'll bring a detective here from 'Frisco, to expose you."

He fell back as if he had been struck a blow in the face.

Robert Ransom half arose from his chair, his features working strangely.

"Ruth! Ruth!" he warned, but she went on.

"I don't know what damnable power you hold over my father, but I know this: that neither his life nor mine is worth what you are asking. You can't do more than kill us. And I won't marry you! There, now! Touch him, and I'll have you run down and dragged to the penitentiary, where you belong."

Bendigo sank breathlessly into a chair.

He could hardly believe his ears. No one else in Shasta had ever dared to speak thus to him.

He stared at her, and by degrees the sudden rage that filled him passed away, to be succeeded by a feeling of admiration.

"You're prettier than ever, and as spunky as a wildcat. I didn't know you had such claws. I didn't know but you were going to jump at me and scratch me!"

She turned from him with fine scorn and stepped toward the window.

As she did so, she passed her father, who was cringing like a whipped spaniel.

"You're a bird worth having," Bendigo shot after her. "One of these tame things I don't want. But a woman of fire, like you, I do want and will have."

"As for your detectives, isn't that fool that came in on the burro one of them? You were mighty quick to go to his help. He's not been here long, and I've more than half suspected, from the first, that he's a fraud."

"I hope he is a detective, and that he'll have you arrested inside of a week."

His anger came back.

"What's the use of talking such nonsense. There's not a detective in California that I fear. Your father, there, is the one who should fear detectives, and I don't think that you're quite free, yourself, on that point."

For reply, she turned contemptuously from the window and went into the other room.

CHAPTER III.

BABYLON BILL AT BEAUTY'S SHRINE.

Peter Bendigo, having failed to properly impress his worth on Ruth Ransom, stepped through the doorway again, for the purpose of returning to the camp, when he ran plump into the arms of Babylon Bill.

"Hello, there!" cried Babylon, falling back, with a gasp. "When you're a-thinkin' of angels you run up ag'inst the other critters. I say! Where's that girl? Where's the angel that come to the help of the thief on the Jericho road?—I mean to the help of the—Thunder! You needn't be so high and mighty!"

Bendigo had hurled him aside with an exclamation of disgust and anger, and was striding on down the path toward the street.

The High Roller stared after him for a second, then turned again to the door.

Ransom, who had heard the talk, had come to the door, and was now looking suspiciously at the big fellow who towered before him.

"At your service!" cried Babylon, removing his hat, and scraping one of his big feet among the pebbles. "I'm a-lookin' fer a female critter that done me the favor of my life. She lives in this hyar palace of logs, an' her name is Miss Ruth Something-or-other, and I s'pose you're her dad. I've hearn say she's got sich a' ornament."

"Won't you come in?"

Babylon Bill responded so promptly that Ransom retreated with a show of perturbation.

At the same instant Ruth came into the room, and Babylon Bill, who was doubling himself up like a jack-knife for the purpose of depositing his bulky frame in the nearest chair, straightened up and bowed like a Chesterfield.

"At ye'r service, Miss. I—"

He was interrupted by a bright-faced young man, who, at the moment, darkened the doorway and came straight into the house without hesitation.

This young man was dressed like an English jockey, and his comings and go-

ings had evoked much comment in Shasta. He was said to be the servant and factotum of the Ransoms.

The High Roller did not get to finish his stare. Robert Ransom, who was wild with emotion from the effects of Bendigo's threats, darted out of the doorway, as the little jockey came in, and disappeared among the rocks.

"Well, may I be—"

Babylon Bill was so astonished that he was about to drop to the chair, but caught himself and again stood erect, with his hat lifted.

Though her distress was evident, Ruth turned toward him with a smile.

"What shall I call you?"

"Babylon."

"Mr. Babylon, this is Mr. Charles Berwick, a friend of our family."

The jockey-like individual extended his hand. Babylon Bill looked at it for a moment as if hesitating to take it. Then he grasped it and closed his fingers with a grizzly's grip.

"O—ou—ouch!"

The jockey hopped up and down and fairly danced with pain.

"I say, mister, you've got a grip like—"

"Hurt ye, did I? Hanged if some people hain't too tender to look at. When ye stuck out ye'r paw I was 'most afraid to tech it. I reckon, now, you hain't never roughed it much in this hyar world?"

"I've seen a good deal of life, thank you. Been to London, you know. And a fellow that's been to London—"

"Is likely to be a bigger fool than most other folks, if he didn't have good strong hoss sense to start with."

"Thank you for the compliment."

"Speakin' of compliments," and Babylon Bill turned to Ruth, "I come hyar with my head full of the purtiest that ever a mortal heered of. Been studyin' 'em out of a book fer the last hour, an' now I've plum fergot every one—"

"How's ever," and he threw his hat on the floor and doubled into a chair, "that there girl done me the slap-uppest favor of my life, an' I'm hyar to say so, an' to tell her that whenever she wants a friend she's got one in Babylon Bill."

"Friends is friends an' lovers is lovers, an' love goes away ahead o' friendship. An' I'm hyar to say that I'll marry her tomorrow, if she'll let me."

He beamed with admiration, and there could be no doubt he thought he had done the proper thing and conferred a great favor on Miss Ruth.

"One of the compliments I fergot, and which now comes back to me, is to the effect that you're a' angel an' this hyar's a paradise, and the burro was the chariot what brung me into ye'r presence. I studied up a whole lot more, but hanged if they hain't clean gone."

"Anyway," and his smile grew more expansive and indulgent, "all you've got to do is to say the word an' I'll send at once fer the parson. I rest the hull thing with you."

Ruth was struck dumb with amazement, and the jockey was forced to stuff his handkerchief into his mouth to keep from laughing outright.

The eyes of the giant wandered from one to the other, as if striving to read their thoughts. He began to feel that he was making a mistake, but could not comprehend why or in what manner. Thinking he had not stated his claims strongly enough, he proceeded to show his desirability as a life partner for any woman.

"I don't doubt that you've heered that I'm the High Roller from Brimstone Bar. In my own right I've got two mines an' forty prospect holes, and—well, they hain't no telling but what any one of 'em may turn out a reg'lar Comstock Lode 'fore to-morrow."

The jockey could not stand it any longer. A spasm of coughing seized him, the handkerchief came out of his mouth, and he broke into a fit of laughter that made the tears stream from his eyes.

Then, suddenly, as if fearing the rage of the giant, he backed into the other room, and they could hear him endeavoring to suppress his mirth, which would unavoidably break out in spite of all he could do.

Ruth maintained her ground and stood before the giant, flushing and hesitating.

"I—I—you do me a great honor, Mr. Babylon! But—"

"Got another lover, hey? Well, may I be gizzled! It's always my luck to come prancin' along after the procession has gone by! But I might 'a' knowed it! Sich a good-lookin' girl as you couldn't walk two blocks without havin' lovers a-trailin' after her by the score, an' o' course she'd pick out some of 'em."

He undoubled himself and stood up before her, bowing.

"I appreciate the honor, I assure you."

"O' course. O' course. Any woman'd do that. Well, if you want a friend any time, jist remember that Babylon Bill is losin' sleep of nights with wishin' to serve ye."

CHAPTER IV.

HOP SING'S LAUNDRY.

A secret and desperate rage filled the heart of the black-browed Peter Bendigo as he departed from the rustic cottage of the Ransoms.

He had had his own way so completely in Shasta that this opposition nettled him almost beyond endurance.

That he had Robert Ransom in his power did not console him so long as he was unable to bend Ruth Ransom to his wishes.

Nevertheless, as he got out into the streets and looked over the shabby camp and realized that he was practically its king, his shoulders straightened and his face cleared.

Passing along the main street, he turned into a laundry, over whose door was displayed the name of Hop Sing.

A yellow-faced Celestial greeted him as he entered; then stood smilingly awaiting his orders.

"I want my wash."

A keen look passed between them.

"Backee here. Wantee see wash first, eh?"

"Correct. I'll take a look at it."

Bendigo glanced through the door that opened on the street, then followed Hop Sing into a back room.

"Whatee up, eh?"

Bendigo surveyed the room carefully and doubtingly. It was filled with shining linen in baskets and hampers.

"Haven't you a better place where we can talk? Take me farther back. This is too near the street."

"Man in othel loom."

"Who?"

"Whatee name, you know. Load-agent man. Clipped last week. Bullet hitee him here."

He tapped his breast.

"Oh, Carson! I'd forgot about him. That's all right. I'm not afraid of him. I want to have a talk with him, after I get through with you."

Hop Sing took a key from the folds of his shirt, walked to the wall, which seemed of solid boards, and lifted a piece of linen.

Back of this linen was a round hole, which a casual observer would not notice. Into it, however, Hop Sing thrust a tiny key, which he turned, and the door swung open.

Through this door both passed, Hop Sing removing the key and locking the door after them.

The room behind resembled an opium joint. It was fitted with carpets and divans, and opium pipes hung on the walls.

In the center a lamp depended from the low ceiling, and this lamp gave all the light the place possessed.

On a cot in the farthest corner lay a man, who looked at them with feverish eyes, but said nothing.

Bendigo nodded to this man, without speaking; then sat down on a chair in front of a little table, and began to talk earnestly to the Chinaman.

"You heerd about that fellow that came in on the burro this morning? He said he was tied up in that ridiculous manner by the boys, and I guess he was right. They caught him and thought they'd play a practical joke on him. Curse him! I wish they had killed him."

"Badee man, eh?"

"Well, he'll do us all up if he's left to

run the length of his rope. Anyway, that's my opinion. And that's why I've called your attention to him."

He looked earnestly at Hop Sing and lowered his voice.

"You're one of the few men in this camp that I can always trust. You've never failed me. You've stuck to me every minute since I saved your life on board that ship in the Chinese seas."

Hop Sing's yellow face fairly glowed with delight.

"You allee time can bettee on Hop Sing. Hop Sing he bullee boy; gottee glass eye."

He pulled down the lid of his right eye, and winked with such solemnity that Bendigo smiled in spite of his earnestness.

"I want you to watch some one else, as well as him," whispering the words so that the man on the cot could not hear him. "Watch the Ransoms. You know all about them, just what I know. That girl defies me. But I'll make her weep blood, if she drives me to it. See if there's any secret understanding between her and this big fellow that calls himself Babylon Bill."

"Allee light," again winking.

A groan came from the cot, and Bendigo got up from the table and went over to where the sufferer lay.

He looked into a dark, cruel face, drawn with pain.

"Got it bad, did you, Carson?"

"Yes, curse it. That fellow stuck his pistol right against my chest. If I only dared to crawl out of this hole. I feel like a poisoned rat down here."

"You're not looking so very well. What does Doc say?"

"Doc says he can pull me through; and I guess he can, fer he's a good one."

"I'll speak to him about you, Carson; and, if he says you're strong enough, we'll slip you out of here to-night and get you into the hills. That'll make another man of you."

"So it will. If I can get to smell the mountain air I'll be ready to handle a pistol inside of a week."

"Well, I'll speak to Doc. And when you're out again, you mustn't be so reckless. If you'd got nabbed, then, it might have gone hard with you, and with some of the rest of us."

CHAPTER V.

THE SIX-SHOT SPOTTER.

The stage coach from 'Frisco to Shasta rattled along the rocky trail and swung around the steep declivities on its way to the famous mining camp.

It was a picturesque trail, with the snow cap of Shasta always in sight, and it drew many exclamations of delight from the passengers.

One of these was an old woman in black, with a big bonnet and glasses, who now turned the talk from mountain scenery to road-agents.

"It's along here they always show themselves," she said, in a high, shaky voice. "I should hate fer 'em to git what little money I brung with me, and that pieter of my dead and gone husband in my reticule I think more of than I do of the money."

There was a straightening of shoulders and a peering ahead.

"Only last week they held up a stage at Dead Man's Canyon. Do you know where that is?" asked a passenger.

"Dead Man's Canyon is—oh, my goodness gracious me! If there they don't come, now."

A rifle had been poked around a big boulder; two men showed themselves, and a rough voice sang out:

"Hands up, er down goes ye'r meat house."

The driver took the command to himself, dropped the lines and thrust his fingers skyward with remarkable celerity. At the same time he put his foot on the brake, and the stage came grindingly to a halt.

A shot was fired, and a half-dozen road-agents lined up on either side of the trail.

"We will kill the first man that attempts to finger a pistol!" came the sharp threat. "Tumble out of that old hearse, every one of ye! Put up your hands! Put up your hands!"

There were many exclamations of alarm, and the old woman fairly shrieked as she grabbed her reticule and made a dive for the door.

She was out of the coach in an inconceivably short time, and then, to the astonishment of all, she threw back her sunbonnet and the glasses, and, pulling a pair of revolvers from beneath her apron, began to shoot with the rapidity of lightning.

The effect was paralyzing.

One of the road-agents dropped dead, another was wounded, and then she turned her attention to the chief—he who had first shown himself and given the command to halt.

Six times the revolver spoke, as rapidly as she could work her fingers, and it could be seen that each time the chief was hit, though he did not fall until the last shot.

Another revolver came out, and the road-agents would have been placed hors de combat but for an unexpected interference. One of the passengers of the stage struck the old woman a tremendous blow on the head with a rock, and knocked her flat in the dust of the trail.

At this, the chief, who had been apparently shot from his feet, leaped up and came on, crying loudly to his men for the purpose of rallying them and infusing them with new courage.

All the road-agents wore masks of black cloth, completely covering the upper portions of their faces, so that it was impossible to say who they were or to recognize them when seen again.

As for the treacherous passenger, he was also disguised, as was seen by the slipping away of his big mustache when he leaped toward the old woman.

He pulled her around, pushed the sunbonnet further back, and cried out:

"The Six-Shot Spotter! I thought as much! There isn't another in these hills that can handle a revolver that way."

The face was recognized, and it was now seen that the old woman was no woman at all, but one of the most dreaded officers of the 'Frisco trail, locally known as the Shasta Six-Shooter.

He stirred, as the masked agents gathered about him, and then opened his eyes.

The blood was trickling from the wound in his head, but his hurt was not serious, and he struggled to a sitting position.

One of the masked men thrust a pistol against his breast and was on the point of pulling the trigger, when the leader pushed it aside.

"Let up on that! I'll 'tend to him. See that he don't get away. That's all you need to do."

The Six-Shooter was still dizzy and confused, but whatever his condition, he was considered too dangerous a man to be trifled with, and two of the road-agents hurled themselves on him and tied him with strong cords, which they drew out of their pockets.

The masked leader turned to the other passengers and surveyed them, cocked revolver in hand.

"Be quick about it!" he growled to his followers. "Get what stuff they've got and then we'll cut out of here. If one of them wriggles a finger, I'll down him."

There was a bag of mail in the coach, which was dragged out and ripped open, but which did not yield a great deal. Then the road-agents went through the passengers with a dexterity that showed experience.

The leader seemed to have suffered no inconvenience from the revolver bullets. His jacket was cut and ripped in two or three places, and in the center of his chest there was a hole, from which, however, no blood flowed.

Why he had not been killed looked very much like a mystery. But it was no mystery at all to the Six-Shooter. He knew that the leader wore beneath his clothing a shirt of mail, or steel armor.

Three gold watches, some pistols and several well-filled purses were all that fell into the outlaws' hands, and the spoil was so much less than they had anticipated that they grumbled a good deal.

"Tumble in! Tumble in!" cried the leader. "And you, driver, drive on like the very old boy was after you, and don't

try to look back, or you may get stung in the eye by a bullet."

The driver needed no second admonition. Releasing the brake, he curled the whip-lash around the flanks of the horses, and sent the stage spinning down the trail.

The dead road-agent was pitched into the canyon; the hurt of the wounded one attended to, and then, when the stage was out of sight, the leader turned to his prisoner.

The Six-Shooter was mentally quite himself again. He knew his danger. He believed his last hour had come.

"Get up, there!"

Though his feet were bound, he contrived, with the assistance of one of the robbers, to stand erect.

He looked at the masked leader, and though he was pale, in his blue eyes there was no flinching.

"You've got me foul. You can do with me as you please. I'm not kicking. You can't kill me but once."

"Curse you! We can kill you a dozen times, if we want to. We can roll the pain of a hundred deaths into one. Drive him on up the mountain."

The disguising dress was torn from him. One of the agents removed the cords from his ankles, and then they set him in their midst and marched him up along the lava slopes of Mount Shasta in a direction that would take them to a point above the camp.

Arriving at a ridge, a few hundred feet farther up, they saw the stage, driven at headlong speed, whirling toward the camp in a cloud of dust. The sight amused them, and they stood stock still and laughed as they viewed it.

The camp was clearly to be seen, with the beetling cliffs, the ragged ridges and the valley-like depressions around it.

The stage was forced to take a round-about trail, and long before it had gained the town, they arrived at the point they were seeking.

Here, a big lumber flume, through which water ran constantly, was stretched on still-like supports from high up the mountain to the edge of the town, where the water dropped into a little lake, which also received the logs, when logs were being run.

The water still rushed on its way, but no practical use had been made of the log flume for several weeks.

Beside this flume, which was but a wide board trough, built of heavy materials to stand the strain to be put on it, the road-agents and their hapless prisoner came to a stand.

The masked leader, whose chest was paining him from the bruises given by the revolver bullets, and who, in consequence, was in an angry mood, stepped to the prisoner's side and smote him in the face.

"Nobody but a coward would do a thing like that," the Six-Shooter hissed. "You wouldn't dare strike me that way if my hands were free."

"You think to provoke me into killing you, eh? Well, you won't succeed!"

"I knew you were a dirty coward!"

For an instant the masked leader hesitated and appeared to be on the point of drawing out a pistol, but he controlled his rage.

"I'm not to kill you here. I'll send you down to your friends. That will let them know what they may expect!"

He stepped back and waved his hand.

Instantly the Six-Shooter was seized and his legs rebound.

Then he was lifted up and hurled bodily into the flume.

The road-agents saw him for a few moments, as the current caught him and swept him swiftly downward; then they turned grimly back into the mountain.

CHAPTER VI.

A STRANGE STORY.

The lake formed by the water that came down from the snows of Shasta through the log flume was just above the camp and only a short distance from the rustic cottage of the Ransoms.

When Robert Ransom hurried out of the cottage, driven into a very frenzy by the words of Peter Bendigo, he turned into the narrow path that ran up the

mountain, and in a short time came to a rocky place near the margin of the lake.

Here he stopped, walked back and forth several times in an uncertain way, and finally approached the water.

One viewing his actions would have been forced to the conclusion that the unhappy man contemplated suicide by drowning.

After a long time he went to a crevice, lifted a slab of stone, and drew out a slimy copper box.

He held the box in his hands and looked at it longingly. Fumbling about, he touched a spring, which released and caused a lid to fly open.

A low cry of ecstatic pleasure came from him.

The sight was enough to draw a cry from any lips.

Within the box, whose interior was dry and silk-lined, was a gold crown, crusted with diamonds.

The gold of the crown was in thin bands and strips, fastened with gold rivets, the whole shaped and held together with green silk.

It was not the crown, though, that would have attracted attention so much as the gems with which it was covered.

They were all large, and made the interior of the box fairly scintillate.

"Just as when I first saw you!"

He seemed to be speaking, not so much to the crown, or to the jewels, as to a silk dragon which appeared to thrust its arrow-headed tongue at him.

"Just as when I first saw you, and the devil came to my heart—the old dragon whose image you must be! Ah, me! Ah, me! It was a good many years ago, and I haven't seen any happiness since. And now—"

He started with a gasp, for he heard his name called distinctly in the tones of his daughter Ruth.

He saw her, too, almost at the same moment, and he saw she was so near he would not have time to close and bury the box without her observing it.

A panic seized him, and for a little while he seemed on the point of hurling box and all into the lake.

His avarice restrained him, and, instead of pitching the box and crown into the water, he hugged them to his breast, and glared about as if contemplating a dash with them into the recesses of the hills.

Ruth came on, calling his name, and he knew, from her altered tones, she had caught sight of him.

Wildly anxious to hide the things, he thrust them into the hole, and began to tug at the flat stone for the purpose of drawing it into position over them.

But his excitement robbed him of all strength. Ordinarily he was able to lift the stone with ease; now he was unequal to the task.

The effort only served to hold him there and make it impossible to keep her from discovering what he had and what he was trying to do.

She tripped toward him like a fawn, glad to see him, for, when he had rushed out of the house that way, she had feared he might do something desperate.

This thought had come to her more strongly after the departure of Babylon Bill.

"Stand back!" Ransom wildly commanded. "Stand back!"

He wheeled about and faced her with crazy fury. There was in his eyes the glare of a wild man or a maniac. She saw it, and trembled, but it made her more resolved to learn what he had and what he was doing.

She put back his restraining hand and drew the copper box and the crown from beneath the edge of the rock.

Then, when she saw what it was, she looked at him with amazement unspeakable.

"What is the meaning of this, father?"

He was crouching on the damp earth, his face in his hands.

"It is the thing Bendigo had in his mind. Oh, my God! how can I tell it?"

She stood before him like an accusing angel, and he, cowering and subdued, told her all.

"It belonged to the Rajah of Jutpore,

Ruth! You know I was an honored officer in a bank in Bombay. There was a rebellion in the rajah's dominions, and he, fearing for the crown, placed it with the bank for safe keeping."

She was pale to her lips, and the box seemed about to fall from her hands.

"The temptation was too great for me. I stole the crown and a lot of money and fled to England!"

"Then I came to America, and in fear of arrest, wandered about until I reached this place. You will see that a few of the diamonds are gone. When I had used up the stolen money I sold them to get more."

"The story I told you before, explaining why we had to leave England and travel about in half-hiding as we did was not true; this is the true explanation!"

"And Bendigo?"

"He knows it all! He knows everything! He was in the bank, at the same time. Soon after we came here he recognized me. Sometimes I think he came here for the purpose of finding me. And he has me in his power!"

"Does he know you have this thing here?"

"I told him I had disposed of it long ago and used up the money, but he don't more than half believe me. He thinks I have it somewhere!"

Ruth's horror, fear and distress were dreadful to contemplate. She seemed turning to stone. The box fell from her fingers.

Ransom snatched it, put back the crown that had dropped out, and closed the lid. Then he looked at her.

The sternness was going out of her face; love and kindness remained. She remembered that he was still her father. Her lips quivered and tears came into her eyes.

She stooped down and put her arms about his neck.

"Oh, it is awful! Awful! But we will try to right the wrong, father, won't we? Isn't there some way we can right it? You have been hiding the crown in there?"

He shoved it into the cavity as if glad to get it out of his hands.

"You despise me! You hate me!" he gasped.

"I don't forget that you are my father and that you're threatened. We'll not talk about the wrong you've done; we'll study to see if it can't be righted. Put the box back, before some one comes and sees it. The secret is safe with me for the present!"

A great sigh of relief came from him. He pushed the box farther into the hole, and then, with her assistance, drew the stone over it.

She was weeping bitterly now, and shaking like a leaf.

Together they smoothed the earth and pebbles and scattered leaves about to obliterate all signs of their presence, and were about to turn away.

Then Ruth leaped backward with a cry of terror.

Chancing to look upward, to where the column of water from the flume fell like a cataract into the lake, she saw the body of a man shoot out of the flume into the air, and fall, whirling swiftly downward.

CHAPTER VII.

RUTH RANSOM AS A HEROINE.

The Six-Shot Spotter tried to steel himself against the terror that tugged at his heart as he was hurled into the flume and felt the water, fresh from Shasta's snows, clutch him with its icy fingers.

He was drawn swiftly under, in spite of his struggles, and speedily became insensible, because he was drowning.

He was as unconscious as a log, when the current shot him out of the flume into the lake, and, if he had had possession of all his faculties, he would have been powerless, for his hands and feet were tied.

Robert Ransom saw the whirling form and echoed Ruth's cry.

At the same instant the roar of the stage wheels was heard on the trail a few hundred yards distant.

However, there was no time to wait for the coming of the stage, as Ruth Ransom saw,

The unfortunate man struck the water and went out of sight.

Without a moment's hesitation she ran to the edge of the lake, and when the man came up and lay for a moment on top of the waves, she sprang to his rescue.

It was a perilous thing for the most expert swimmer. The cataract tumbling downward filled the center of the lake with a shower that was enough to drown a sea lion, and the imperiled man had risen just on the edge of this.

The girl shuddered as the icy water struck through her clothing; but she nevertheless swam boldly out.

Robert Ransom ran up and down the shore, wringing his hands and crying out in frenzied excitement, utterly powerless to do anything.

The Six-Shooter was going down the second time, but now he rose again, and the girl seized him by the shoulder and attempted to draw him ashore.

But the burden was too heavy. He did not struggle, and so make it impossible for her to pull him out, but his weight and the circling swirl of the water were too great for her strength.

However, she kept him from sinking again, and the cries of Robert Ransom drew the attention of the stage people.

The driver again put his foot on the lever of the brake. The stage came to a halt and the passengers tumbled out.

Ransom screamed and beckoned.

With no fear of road-agents, the driver rushed to the margin of the lake, took in the situation at a glance, leaped into the water, and succeeded in drawing Miss Ruth and her burden to the shore.

A cry of surprise arose.

"The Shasta Six-Shooter!"

"Yes," said the driver, as he felt for the feeble heart-beats, "and he's worth a hundred dead men yet."

CHAPTER VIII.

IN WHICH MURDER IS DONE.

Silence and semi-darkness were about the mine named the Happy Thought.

The mine was Ruth Ransom's. Though it had never been much worked, some good ore had been taken from it, and—a thing unknown to the public—one or two very valuable pockets had been found.

The silence was broken by a light foot-step, and Ruth Ransom slipped into the rough building that stood above the mine shaft.

Back in the rustic cottage, not more than a half mile distant, she had left the Six-Shooter, in care of the little English servant, Charles Berwick, or English Charley.

After being rescued from the lake, he had been taken to the cottage and a doctor summoned. He was not seriously hurt, though much bruised from his rough ride down the flume.

Slipping into the shed, Ruth advanced with cautious steps to a rocky niche, from which she drew out a heavy bundle.

When it was unrolled it revealed a canvas bag evidently containing a quantity of coin.

"Father had his secret, and I have mine!"

She poured the contents of the bag into her apron and ran her fingers through the heap. There were many nuggets of gold whose glint she could see even in the half darkness.

"Father needs this money, and he shall have it. It came from that last pocket. I didn't tell of that one. And now I can make him happy by giving him this. That crown must be sent back to its owner, and this gold will enable him to do it. If not—I'll sell the mine!"

She stopped, and cringed in the gloom.

Two men were coming toward the mine from the direction of the cabin.

With nervous haste she got on her feet, put the gold back in the buckskin bag, and returned it to its hiding place.

Having done this, she crept to the door and stood in a listening attitude.

They came closer, and she recognized them as Peter Bendigo and her father.

They were talking about her, and by close listening she could tell that Bendigo was again using threats.

She stepped through the doorway and toward them.

Bendigo looked up and saw her, for they were near, and the darkness was not too great, and then stood still, holding Ransom by the arm.

"There she is now," she heard Bendigo say. "Tell her what you have promised."

Ransom shrank before her, then drew himself away from Bendigo, and, passing his daughter shamefacedly, went into the mine building.

Bendigo came straight up to her.

"What do you want?" she demanded.

"I want you, my beauty. I've been talking to the old man—your father—again. He's got some sense in his head, and you must have some in yours. Since you know all about what he's afraid of—"

She drew back with a low cry. Then she remembered that her father had said Bendigo did not know of the whereabouts of the crown.

He came close up to her, took her by the wrists, drew her to him and forced a kiss upon her.

She cried out again and struggled to escape. Then she got her hands away and leaped back.

"Help!" she called. "Father, help!"

"No use to scream out to him. He knows when to come and when to let me alone. If you'd only be as sensible as your father!"

She drew back and struck him in the face.

It was a stinging blow, and aroused his anger.

He caught her and drew her along at his side.

The she heard a sound of rushing feet, and, twisting about, beheld her father coming at a run, and knew that his wrath had been wrought to a pitch of fury.

"Stop!" he shouted.

Instead of obeying Bendigo jerked the girl along at his side.

Then a pistol shot rang out, and Bendigo, releasing her and throwing up his hands, fell on his face.

Ruth Ransom cried aloud in an agony of fear and apprehension, when she saw Bendigo sink down, and turned to her father.

"Oh, father!"

Ransom seemed to wither under that accusing cry. He stretched out his hands.

"What—what has happened?"

She stooped down to Bendigo, who had fallen in a limp heap. She saw that he was already dead.

"You have killed him, father! You have killed him!"

Ransom put out his hands gropingly.

"What did you say? Who has been killed?"

Fear and horror shook her till she could hardly stand.

"Oh, my God! This is terrible! Let us get away from here as quick as we can. No one knows you did it! No one can know!"

She took his arm and drew him from the spot, and he, walking as if in an unconscious mood, went willingly with her.

CHAPTER IX.

A BIT OF THE MYSTERIOUS.

English Charley swung his legs on the edge of the cot that held the Six-Shot Spotter, and asked him a multitude of questions about the hold-up of the stage, the appearance of the road-agents and that terrible ride down the flume.

"And who did you say was that leader who wore the coat of mail?"

"That was Captain Hawk! I didn't see his face, though I know who he was. I tried to hit him in the head, but I couldn't, and that coat of mail kept me from putting a bullet through his body!"

"And what made you want to do that?"

The Six-Shooter looked at him languidly.

"I guess you haven't been here very long, young man! Every one here knows the authorities sent me from 'Frisco for the express purpose of killing or capturing Captain Hawk, and breaking up his band!"

English Charley drew a long breath.

"Then you're a detective?"

"That's what I'm called. I'm a thief-hunter! I'm down here to drive these fellows out of the country. That's why they wanted to kill me!"

"And this fellow who calls himself Babylon Bill?"

The Six-Shooter studied the face of English Charley closely before replying, and he seemed to see something there that puzzled him.

"I don't know anything about him! Perhaps he's one of the agents, though Miss Ruth don't think so! That's a fine girl, Miss Ruth!"

"I'll tell her so, for you, if you want me to."

English Charley was disappointed. The detective had not talked as he desired him to. He hopped down off the cot and went to the door, and was gone without waiting for an answer.

The Spotter permitted his thoughts to linger pleasantly about the young woman who had risked her life for his and whose father's roof now sheltered him.

"I'm a fool for thinking of her in that way!"

He dropped his head back with a short, hard laugh.

The detective did himself injustice. He was a handsome young fellow, strong and athletic, and with a pleasant, open face. Many a woman in the Golden State would have been proud to own his admiration or love.

He could not draw his mind away from her, though he had other things which he knew ought to be engaging his mental attention, and, as the gloom thickened in the room and out, he began to conjure her sweet face out of the shadows and to let the memory of her voice ring pleasantly in his ears. He was in a dangerous mood for a man who desired to remain heart whole and fancy free.

From these things he was aroused with a start. The silence was broken by the sound of voices, and Ruth appeared in the doorway, wildly agitated, half-supporting her father.

Ransom grasped at the side of the door to steady himself and seemed to reel as he stepped into the house.

"Charley!" Ruth called. "I need help!"

The sport, who, for the last hour had been lying on the cot dressed, except for his stockings and shoes, leaped up, heedless of his many bruises and his weakened condition, and ran to her side.

"Charley has gone out. Let me assist you!"

"You? You are better, then?"

"Much better! I can carry your father, I think. Let me get hold of him!"

Indeed, this seemed advisable, for Ransom, who had leaned against the side of the door, as if dazed and stunned, now slipped limply toward the floor.

The detective caught him as he fell, and, with Ruth's aid, half carried and half dragged him in, and put him to bed.

"He has fainted. Get some water, please, and light a lamp!"

The Six-Shooter flew to obey, and soon the lamp and the water were provided.

He got out some brandy, too, at her request, and a quantity poured down Ransom's throat served to revive and stimulate him, so that he rallied and feebly opened his eyes.

When they fell on Ruth, he shrank into the bed and appeared to cower, as if he feared her gaze.

The detective saw that she was as white as a sheet and trembling violently. All the roses were gone from her cheeks. He wanted to know what the trouble was, but she did not volunteer an explanation, and he was too much of a gentleman to hint his desires in this respect.

Ransom grew stronger as the moments passed, and the Six-Shooter took the first opportunity to beat a retreat and put on his shoes.

While doing this he heard a noisy buzz near the door, mingled with the tramp of many feet.

As he was nearest the door, he opened it and looked out.

He started back with a gasp of surprise. Thirty or forty men were there, armed with weapons of every description.

He stepped outside to see what they wanted, even though his first thought was that they wanted him.

He saw they were chiefly of the tougher element of the camp, the hangers-on of the bar-rooms and the bums of the streets.

"What's up?"

They glared at him, and their mutterings welled into a roar of anger.

"Stand out of the way, if you don't want to get hurt! We want Robert Ransom, for the murder of Peter Bendigo!"

The words were peremptory, and hands were menacingly lifted.

The Shasta Six-Shooter was almost swept from his feet with astonishment. But he was soon made to understand that he had heard aright, and that Ransom was the man the mob was after.

He was about to draw back for the purpose of acquainting Ruth with the character of the demand, when she pushed by him through the door and confronted the mob with flashing eyes.

"My father is not well! He is in bed and half delirious. Won't you be kind enough to go away and not trouble him to-night?"

Only for a moment did they stand before her respectfully. Then they broke into jeering cries of disbelief.

"We'll take a look at the old gent and see for ourselves. He was well enough a while ago to pull a pistol on Peter Bendigo, and kill him. I guess he ain't sick to hurt!"

The Six-Shot Spotter was dumfounded. He saw the men were in earnest in their statements, and the singular actions of Ransom and his daughter were still puzzling him.

"It's possible there's a mistake," he urged, pushing out into their midst, a movement which did not at all please them. "Better investigate first! Don't be too hasty!"

He was hurled rudely aside, while a number of men rushed past Ruth into the house.

He heard Ransom's shriek of fear and Ruth's outcry, and, maddened by them, struggled to free himself, but he was still too weak to make any effective struggle.

Ransom was pulled from the bed and dragged out of the house, though he resisted with all his might, shrieking and fighting and clinging with blind desperation to the bed and the chairs and the door posts.

As for Ruth, she was so stricken with fear, believing that her father was to be taken to instant death, that she threw herself on the ground at the feet of these men, and, fairly groveling, begged them to spare his life.

There were many present who looked at her respectfully, and even pityingly, and would have gone to her assistance under other circumstances—would even have fought for her and her father. Now they stood back in cold silence.

They believed that Robert Ransom was guilty of the murder of Bendigo, and, so believing, they knew that border justice demanded his death.

It was a strange scene—the pleading girl, the dazed and helpless prisoner, the excited crowd of men, the detective restrained by strong hands, all made visible by the gleam of lanterns and by the faint light of the moon.

Without further ado Ransom was forced along toward the principal street, the crowd increasing momentarily as the excitement and the news spread.

In front of a public house they halted where a sign-post thrust out its arms suggestively.

A box was tumbled into the street beneath this arm, and over the arm the end of a rope was thrown. After that Ransom was hoisted to the box.

Ransom roused as if from a dream and looked over the crowd. His lips trembled and his face blanched. He beheld the ashen features of his daughter, and farther out, he saw English Charley running that way.

"You're about to hang an innocent man!" he cried, and his words grew strong as if with the force of conviction. "I declare to you here, in the presence of death,

and in the sight of Heaven, that I did not kill Peter Bendigo."

Silence followed the announcement.

Then a man near the box held up a revolver and sneeringly exclaimed:

"This is your pistol. It has one chamber empty. It was found on the ground near where Bendigo fell. Explain that, will ye? If you didn't kill him, who did?"

The crowd moved and buzzed with excitement. The rope was drawn farther over the arm of the post, and some one fiercely cried:

"Hang him!"

There was a simultaneous movement toward the box, and Ransom, clutched by strong hands, was nearer death than he had ever been before. Apparently no power could save him.

But he was saved.

Ruth Ransom, upheld by desperation, leaped through the crowd to the box at her father's side.

"You want to know who shot Peter Bendigo? It was I."

Though her face was like marble, her eyes fairly blazed as she made this astounding declaration.

The crowd was silenced through surprise, and fell back and away from her, and her father stood once more free. But he looked about in the old dazed way as if he did not exactly comprehend what had taken place.

"It was I who killed Peter Bendigo! Don't hang an innocent man; hang me!"

She lifted a hand dramatically.

"Do you want to know why I killed him? It was because of his persecutions. He tried to force me to marry him! He insulted me! Is there a man in Shasta who says I did not have a right to kill him, under such circumstances?"

The crowd began to hum again.

"If you think I did wrong, hang me, but save my father."

CHAPTER X.

BILL POURS OIL ON TROUBLED WATERS.

"Hooroar!"

The sound came like the bellow of a wild bull, cutting harshly through the low buzz of the crowd.

All turned in the direction and beheld Babylon Bill pushing his way along, with a big box on his shoulders.

"If they's anybody in this hyar crowd that's going to be hung, I allow it's the Bald Hornet from Brimstone Bar!"

He seemed very much in earnest as he cast the box on the ground and hoisted his huge bulk on top of it.

"'Cause why?"—lifting his forefinger and marking each word impressively—"that there girl and that there girl's paw air liars from Lierville. It was ye'r uncle that shot Peter Bendigo, an' all because he tied me to that there muel, with my nose to its tail, and turned me adrift in the streets."

Two or three of the men nearest the box snickered their unbelief, whereupon the giant turned on them with looks of ineffable scorn and anger.

"An' as fer that there pistol with which the work was did," hurling his words straight at these men, "the girl pawned it in Handsome Harry's pawnshop, an' I bought it there, an' crept after Bendigo tell I popped him!"

"Git down off'n that box!" was howled.

But the High Roller was there for a purpose, and he did not choose to obey. He intended to save the lives of the father and daughter, even at the risk of his own, and he faced the new speaker with a glare of defiance.

The Shasta Six-Shooter had freed himself, and now crowded close up to the giant's side, for the purpose of being near the girl that he might aid her all in his power.

English Charley, too, was close at hand, though every one looked on him as being too effeminate for a tussle where muscle and bulldog grit counted.

In the midst of it all, and strangely pathetic, was the puzzled, pitiful face of Robert Ransom, and the ashy, anguished one of his daughter.

A man who was disgusted at the turn of events, and who had, a short time before,

been roaring for blood, slipped close up to Babylon Bill and jerked him from the box.

The giant caught himself in the fall. At the same time his hands closed on the man who had given him the pull, and his fingers tightened with an unshakable grip.

He lifted himself again to the box and lifted the man with him, and then he hoisted the fellow high in air above his head, and so held him, kicking and writhing like a child.

Babylon Bill had a giant's strength as well as a giant's size. For the moment he was in a rage, too, and his strength was thus apparently increased.

As he held the man thus on high, he belowed out his anger like a mad bull, and then hurled the man from him through the air with all his force.

The astonished individual, who had been too scared and surprised to do more than kick and yell, flew straight over the heads of the crowd, and took a header into a pool of water like a giant bullfrog.

It was a fortunate thing for him that the pool was there, for the water and the soft mud broke his fall and kept him from breaking his bones.

He scrambled up, a ridiculous sight, his clothing soaked, and began to dig the mud out of his face and beard.

The thoughts of the crowd were given a humorous turn, and yells of laughter were the result.

Babylon Bill realized that he had in a measure accomplished his purpose. He did not fear the overthrown man, though the latter drew a revolver and talked loudly for a time.

The big giant on the box gave him no heed, but turned again to the crowd.

"Pardners, we're all interested in the good name of this hyar camp of Shasta. Peter Bendigo has been murdered; but it wasn't done by this girl ner her dad. No, ner it wasn't done by me, though I did say so a minute ago, jist to attract your attention."

"But she says she killed him!"

Ruth Ransom stood as silent and immovable as a sphinx.

"She may say though I have my doubts that she done it. Anyways, pardners, we'll not let Judge Lynch hang a woman, will we? We'll not let the news go from the Sierras to the Golden Gate that we didn't have no more manhood about us than that, will we?"

"No, no!" came from a dozen throats.

Babylon Bill's smile grew as expansive as that of an alligator.

"Of course we won't! The Shasta men think too much of the sex. If she killed Bendigo we'll give her a fair trial; we'll have a jedge and a jury, an' lawyers and all sich and so forth. And then—well, we'll let the jury say what is to come after that."

The suggestion caught with the crowd.

The Six-Shooter plucked at Ruth and her father.

"He's opening a way for you to get out. As soon as it's done, better go back to the house. I'll endeavor to see that you're not molested."

Ruth gave him a grateful look and slipped from the box; while the High Roller, falling into a humorous strain, soon had the erstwhile bloody-minded mob tittering with laughter.

CHAPTER XI.

BABYLON BILL SEEMS A GAY DECEIVER.

Babylon Bill did not cease his efforts until the pacified mob had permitted Miss Ruth and her father to return unmolested to their home; then he went back to his boarding house, kept by an Irish widow named McCulish.

Mrs. McCulish, who knew what had been going on, and who had been unduly exercised for his personal safety, met him in the hall with a cry of pleasure.

"An' it's back yez air ag'in? Sorry the day, but it was meself that t'ought yez wor a goner!"

The blandishing widow had had her matrimonial eyes on Babylon Bill ever since his entrance into Shasta, and particularly ever since he had come to board at her establishment.

And she had not been slow in endeavor-

ing to impress on him her varied charms, albeit they were a bit faded.

But then Babylon Bill was no young and handsome lad, with the better end of his life all before him, she reasoned, and her chances, therefore, ought to be as good as another's.

"Then ye didn't hear about the sweet things I said to that same young woman?" the Bald Hornet asked, watching to see the roses of jealous anger bloom in the widow's cheeks.

"Tare and 'ounds, no! But I did hear about the swate spaches yez made to her undher her father's own roof!"

Babylon Bill stopped, with his hands in his pockets, and thrust his tongue into his cheek.

"Mrs. McCulish, I was jist practicin'! Jist a rehearsin', you understand, intendin' fer to say them same words to you at the very first opportunity. An' I reckon that opportunity's arriv'!"

"Go 'long w'd ye!" slapping him with the cloth she carried. "Ye're a desavin' crayture, that's phwat ye air. Ye talks to me loike I was a gyurl an' ye wor a youngster. An' ez fer practicin', it's meself that believes ye've talked that way to more women than ye've got fingers an' toes."

The giant advanced toward her, ogglingly, and she retreated, as in duty bound.

"I tell ye what, widder," planting himself in the middle of the floor and teetering up and down, as was his wont, "they ain't many women honored as you've been. I tol' you, t'other day that I was goin' to marry you sooner or later, and I'm free to say to you now that there's more'n a hundred flutterin', palpitatin' angels along the rim of Shasta's snowy peak that's a-dyin' to hear me speak to them words like what I've spoke to you."

"When the Bald Hornet from Brimstone Bar offers his heart to a woman—"

"It's a gizzard ye've got, ye blatherin' crayture. Ye call ye'self the Bald Hornet, whin it's a mountain fool hen ye air, shure!"

Of all fool creatures the fool hen is the worst, and Babylon Bill, who really wished to stand well in the widow's estimation, winced under the thrust.

He was about to reassure her of his undying love and devotion, and she was blushing in anticipation of the compliment, when the door opened and the servant announced English Charley.

The little English jockey pranced in, hat in hand, bowing and smiling.

"Oh, I say; it's too bad to interrupt your tete-a-tete!"

With cool assurance he stopped in front of them and fanned himself with his hat.

"If there's anything in the world that's aggravating it's a thing like that. But I assure you, I didn't intend it. I came here at the request of Mr. Ransom. He would like to see you."

He indicated Babylon Bill.

"Special hurry?"

"I think so, from his manner."

The jockey beat a retreat, and the giant managed to steal a kiss from the blushing cheeks of Mrs. McCulish.

"I don't suppose it's anything of importance, and I'll be back before you kin wink twice. I've got something I want to say to you very p'ticular."

He was out of the house, in a moment, following English Charley along the streets.

He found Ransom at home, in a state of considerable mental excitement. Ruth was there, also, her manner showing infinite distress.

English Charley did not enter the house, and Babylon Bill dropped into a chair.

"I want to thank you for what you did for us to-night, for you saved my life and my daughter's. You stated at one time that it was you who killed Peter Bendigo. Was it so?"

Babylon Bill surveyed him with comical gravity, then looked at Ruth.

"Well, pardner, if it'll 'commodate you, an' make happy that lovin' creeper—to whom I'm ag'in offerin' my hand and heart—I'll say that I killed six men!"

"But it's the truth we want. I'm sure you did not kill Bendigo. And I had you brought here because I want to declare to

you my own innocence and the innocence of my daughter.

"I give you my solemn word of honor, that, though they showed my pistol in evidence, I did not fire the fatal shot."

CHAPTER XII.

SIX-SHOT CONQUERS THE CHINAMAN.

The investigations which the detective carried on the next day were for the purpose of settling this point in his own mind; for Ransom had declared to him, also, his innocence of the murder of Bendigo.

There could be no doubt that Bendigo was dead. More, his funeral was to take place that day. The camp was still much excited by the killing.

The detective had gone out on the rocky slopes near the Happy Thought Mine and was puzzling over the tracks found.

The soil was hard and stony and but little impression had been left by the feet of those who had visited the mine the previous night.

However, the stain of blood was still there, and he had been shown the spot where the revolver, with the empty chamber, had been picked up.

The body of Bendigo had been discovered not a great while after the killing. The shot had been heard by some of his cronies. They had hurried up the slope, and had found him quite dead, but still warm and limp, and the revolver on the ground, not a dozen feet from where he lay.

The Six-Shooter, who was almost himself again, had made some inquiries in the town calculated to elucidate the mystery.

He had found that Ruth Ransom had had the pistol repaired the previous day, and had purchased cartridges for it. This, with her declaration on the box that she had killed Bendigo, convinced many people—in fact, the majority of the people—of her guilt.

The Shasta Six-Shooter might have been convinced, too, but for the impression she had made on him.

He fancied he had read her heart and knew her character, and his belief was strong that she was a pure-minded woman, incapable of committing such a crime, even in a rage.

But then the Spotter was somewhat biased.

As he walked to and fro over the ground near the Happy Thought, with his eyes scanning every foot of soil and earth, he approached a tree.

His absorption in his task had kept him from closely watching the backward trail, and, while his back had been turned, not a minute before, a human figure had climbed up the tree like a cat.

The figure was that of a Chinaman, whose glittering black eyes now watched with tigerish ferocity the advance of the detective.

As he watched, from about his waist he unwound a long silken cord, and attached one end to his right wrist. At the other end of the cord there was a sphere of lead as large as an egg.

As the detective came on with bowed head, the Chinaman hugged one of the branches of the tree and placed the cord in order in his hands.

Then, when the detective was just beneath him, he dropped from the bow.

His feet struck the detective's shoulders, and the drop was so sudden and unexpected that the detective was knocked down and hurled some distance away.

Before he could half rise, the Chinaman's arms swept through the air; the silk cord, with the leaden-weighted end, twisted in choking folds about his neck, while the lead itself gave him such a rap on the head that he was almost reduced to insensibility.

But, though stunned, disconcerted and choking, the detective was neither conquered nor captured.

He staggered to his feet, and tried to cast off the cord, which he felt tightening about his throat, and at the same time made a rush for his assailant.

The latter drew on the cord, darted backward, and ducked to avoid the detective's blow.

The detective felt his senses reeling. His lungs seemed about to burst, the cord cut

as if it were a knife, and his head and eyes filled with gorged blood.

But he knew that his life depended on his exertions, and he darted forward again, striking with all the force at his command.

It was a successful blow. The clinched fist caught the Chinaman in the ear and knocked him senseless.

The Six-Shooter dropped at the Chinaman's side, in a condition almost as helpless. But he still retained control of his mind and had sufficient strength remaining to untwist the terrible cord from about his neck.

His throat felt as if it had been cased in bands of steel, and the cord had so pressed into the flesh that purple indentations remained after its removal.

Lying spent and exhausted at the Chinaman's side, life and strength came slowly back to the detective.

He saw the Chinaman stir, and this completed his restoration.

Springing to his feet, he examined the cord critically and looked coolly at the man who had assaulted him without apparent cause.

He knew, though, that there had been abundant cause. No words were needed to tell him that the Chinaman was but doing the bidding of the road-agents.

Previous investigation had convinced him that some of the Chinese of Shasta were allies of Captain Hawk.

The Chinaman again stirred and showed some evidence of returning consciousness. Whereupon the Six-Shooter took the cord that had so nearly choked out his own life and bound the Chinaman with it. Then he cut a strip from the Chinaman's blouse and applied it as a gag.

As he pulled at the blouse, a letter dropped out of an inner pocket. He saw at a glance that it was from Captain Hawk; and, as soon as he had the Chinaman secured, he opened and read it.

The letter did not speak of the present attack, but it seemed to show that Captain Hawk was to meet his band of outlaws that night at a certain place in Shasta.

"Aha! Well, I'll try to be there, too."

He refolded the letter, put it into one of his own pockets, dragged the Chinaman away from the trail, and left him lying, still bound, in a rocky depression.

"His friends will find him, no doubt, before the day is over. And if not, I can come back and release him by and by. He'll have time to reflect on the foolishness of what he tried to do."

With this, the Six-Shooter left the vicinity of the Happy Thought and bent his steps toward the camp.

CHAPTER XIII.

SIX-SHOT GETS INTO A TIGHT PLACE.

In the little room assigned him at the Ransom home, shut completely from the view of any one in the street or elsewhere by tightly-closed blinds, the Shasta Six-Shooter proceeded to make certain radical changes in his appearance and attire.

He had resolved on a daring movement, and one that, to carry through successfully, would require elaborate disguising and clever acting; and he had already seen the Shasta marshal and arranged for help at the proper moment.

He meant to invade the lair of the road-agents, which he now believed to lie back of Hop Sing's laundry, and to make a bold effort to there arrest Captain Hawk and drag him out to the light.

He knew well the captain's appearance; had, in fact, been fairly well acquainted with the redoubtable road-agent leader in other days, before Hawk took to robbery and the trail. Hawk was about his own age and build.

Standing before a little mirror, the Shasta Six-Shooter put on and took off certain wigs and mustaches, compared certain pigments with his natural complexion, and studied various combinations and colors, all for the purpose of determining how he should disguise.

Darkness had long since fallen, and the miners and prospectors were in from their claims and labors for a night of fun and frolic.

When he had disguised himself to his satisfaction, and so resembled Captain Hawk

that one of Hawk's most intimate associates would have had trouble in detecting the imposture, he sat down and again read over the letter he had taken from the Chinaman.

"In the rear of Hop's. At eleven. 'Lava Beds.'"

These were the directions on the sheet of paper, and he understood them to indicate that the meeting would be in the laundry of Hop Sing, at eleven, and the words by which admittance could be gained were "Lava Beds."

He remained closely housed until his watch showed the approach of the hour, then buckled his pistols about him and sallied out into the darkness.

Investigations before nightfall showed that the Chinaman had escaped or been released.

He went out the back way, walking with much silence and care, for the Chinaman's attempt made him fearful and wary.

By a roundabout route he gained the rear of the laundry, and crouched in the gloom for developments.

He had been there but a few moments when he saw a man walk into the laundry, give a peculiar rap on the clothes-stand and whisper the agreed words.

The man disappeared, and the detective also walked in boldly, gave the same raps, and whispered "Lava Beds" in the ear of the Chinaman who stood there.

He halted a moment before the fellow to see if his disguise was penetrated. The Chinaman thought him Captain Hawk, and so addressed him.

A guard let him into the rear room, and then into the apartment that lay still farther back.

He began to realize what a perilous thing he was doing when he got into this last room, and saw by the low-burning lamp that there was no way out of it.

The wounded man was no longer in the cot, but two or three road-agents were grouped about a table, playing cards, and they came forward to greet him as he stepped inside.

He spoke coolly, not wishing to committ himself, and growled out that he had caught a cold and could hardly talk.

It did, indeed, seem so. His voice croaked like that of a frog.

He turned about, loosened his pistols in their places that he might have them handy and stared at the door, which was again opening.

He nearly leaped from his seat when he beheld the man that came through it.

It was English Charley.

In all his varied experience the detective had never been so dumfounded. He was almost too surprised to think.

English Charley advanced with his usual urbanity, and held out his hand.

"Glad to see you," he whispered. "My, I thought I wasn't going to get here to-night."

He halted and looked queerly at the disguised man, but the dim light kept him from penetrating the disguise.

"You're a little ahead of time. I promised I'd be here at eleven, and you didn't think you could get here till a half-hour later. Got through before you expected, I reckon?"

A feeling that his peril was very great swept over the Shasta Six-Shooter. English Charley's eyes were as keen as a ferret's, and were studying him closely.

He replied with a plausible explanation, and again urged a dreadful cold to account for the harshness of his voice.

The English jockey dropped back toward the door, his suspicions fully alive, as the detective could see.

The Shasta Six-Shooter realized that he was about to be denounced to the men there, and got on his feet, intending to get near the door and hurl himself on the little man.

"Down him!" English Charley hissed. "He is not Captain Hawk."

The announcement fairly paralyzed the outlaws for a moment. They sat glued to their chairs, as if in unbelief.

Then they broke into a roar of rage.

The detective's situation was so critical that a moment's indecision might have

been fatal. He half uplifted a whistle, intending to call to his assistance, by a blast, the police help for which he had arranged.

But he dropped it as quickly, and sprang straight toward English Charley, who was still backing toward the door.

Before the road-agents at the table could get out their weapons he had reached English Charley and swung him around between himself and them as a shield.

The little man writhed and struggled, but he was as helpless as a child in the grasp of the Six-Shooter, for, though he had not entirely regained his old strength, the Six-Shooter was never a weakling, even at his worst.

He lifted the little jockey against his breast, and, holding him thus, firmly backed toward the door, crying out:

"If you want to kill this fellow, shoot away. You'll find it a hard job to hit me without hitting him."

English Charley was badly scared. He fought at first with fiery energy, then dropped helplessly in the detective's arms, as if in a half faint.

In spite of the warning and of the danger that must come to the jockey by a shot, one of the outlaws lifted his weapon to fire.

But he was not quick enough for the eagle-eyed and quick-fingered Shasta Six-Shooter.

Before the man's revolver came half up, the detective had drawn one, which he leveled with the rapidity of thought, and fired, without releasing the man he held as a shield.

The bullet from the detective's revolver crashed through the fellow's wrist, causing him to drop his weapon with a cry of anguish.

Reaching the door, the detective hurled English Charley from him back into the room; then darted through the doorway into the other apartment and into the laundry, to the astonishment of the almond-eyed Celestial on guard, who still thought him Captain Hawk.

His whistle was at his lips, as he reached the street, but he did not blow it, for he saw advancing in the shadows at a quick pace, a little distance away, Captain Hawk himself.

The muffled sound of the revolver-shot back of the laundry had reached Captain Hawk and aroused his curiosity as well as his fear.

The detective awaited Hawk's approach, resolved to leap on him and pin him down, and so effect his capture then and there, but Hawk was too wary. He heard the clamor within the building, and stopped short.

Fearing Hawk would escape, the detective ran toward him with uplifted revolver.

For a moment the redoubtable captain stared in stupefaction at his counterpart; then hurled at the detective, with much skill and force, a revolver plucked from his belt.

The Six-Shooter might have shot and killed Hawk—a thing he did not desire. He dodged the whirling revolver and sprang forward again.

But the opportunity had passed. Hawk had darted around a corner into the gloom, and when the Shasta Six-Shooter reached the spot, no one was to be seen, except some citizens, who were running forward, excited by what they thought the indications of a fight.

CHAPTER XIV.

AN EMPTY NEST AND A DEED OF DARING.

The detective put his whistle to his lips and sent a shrill blast echoing along the streets.

It was soon responded to. Two men came out of the nearest alley, three approached from the opposite corner, and others hurried up from various directions.

Within less than five minutes ten men were gathered, ready to do the bidding of the man disguised as Captain Hawk.

The detective had closely watched the door of the laundry and knew that no one had come out of it. Unless there was a secret door, he had some of the road-agents in a trap, for he had men stationed at the rear.

The Chinaman was on guard, as imperturbable as before, though the Six-Shooter fancied he saw a look of fear and uneasiness in the almond eyes.

"Lava Beds," whispered the Six-Shooter, walking straight up to him.

The Chinaman stared.

"Whatee want, eh? Wantee wash? Hop Sing, he gone out."

"He don't know what 'Lava Beds' means, now, though he knew very well a little while ago. We'll not fool with him. Guard him here, one of you, and the others come with me."

The detective approached the door and tried the knob. To his surprise it yielded, and the door opened.

Except for the piles of washing, the room was vacant, and he hurried to the door of the secret rear apartment where he had encountered English Charley.

He did not find it at first, because of the linen on the walls, and for the further reason that the location of the door was not shown by any joints.

It was locked, but it yielded to the persuasive influence of the men's shoulders, and flew open.

The detective led the way in, holding up in one hand a lamp he had snatched from a bench, and in the other a revolver.

But this room, likewise, was empty. The table stood in the corner, as he had seen it, with a pack of playing cards on it, but the outlaws and English Charley were gone.

"Beat!"

The Six-Shooter had feared this result, which, however, did not lessen his disappointment and chagrin.

"Search the place! We must find where they went out!"

The search was begun at once. The walls were inspected and sounded, but, so far as eye or ear could discover, there was no back door—no way by which any one could get in or out, except that through which the officers had come.

The second room and the front room were searched in the same careful way, with the same result.

The Chinaman protested at first, because they tossed the wash about, but the peculiar look in his eyes showed how he was enjoying their discomfiture.

The road-agents had given them the slip, and when more than an hour had been spent thus uselessly, the hunt was given over and the officers departed from the laundry.

"Findee whatee you for looker? Bed looms fol Hop Sing."

There was malicious enjoyment in these words, shot after them by the Chinaman as they left the place.

The detective crossed the street in a despondent mood, though his eyes were still about him and his ears alert.

He walked on down-town, puzzling over the mysterious disappearance of the road-agents from the house, when, near an alley, he observed a man beckoning to him.

He gave a start of amazement when he saw that it was English Charley.

The little jockey's connection with the affair had puzzled and pained him. The detective had not suspected him of being a road-agent accomplice. Did Ruth and her father know anything of this?

These thoughts swept through his mind as he recognized the beckoning man as English Charley.

Naturally he suspected a trap, and halted to survey the way before him.

This seemed to disgust English Charley, who turned about, after wriggling his fingers against his nose to express his contempt.

"Hang the danger! I'll see what the fellow's up to and where he goes."

The jockey was going boldly on down the street and appeared to be noticing the detective no further.

He soon turned again, though, and seeing the detective coming on, he halted at the entrance to an alley.

Apparently, he wanted to speak to the Shasta Six-Shooter, and the latter, after thinking the thing over, approached with due caution.

He was resolved to lay violent hands on English Charley, and by threats force him

to tell what he knew of Captain Hawk and the mystery of the laundry.

That he was still disguised as Captain Hawk did not draw to himself the attention of the street passers, who were used to beholding strangers and had no knowledge of the personal appearance of the road-agent chief.

"I want to speak to you just one minute, please," said the jockey, stepping back into the alley as the Six-Shooter drew near. "About that business a while ago. It's important. You're awfully cute, and you think you've found our hiding place. But what will it amount to? We can change it."

"But I've found out you," advancing still.

"That for you discovery." It amounts to nothing. I'm not the one you think me. Let me tell you. Stoop down here."

The alley was vacant, so far as the detective could discern, and he had no fear of the jockey alone. His mind was fully made up to grasp and drag the jockey into the street as soon as he had heard what was to be said.

He bent his head; then fell back with a gasp of surprise. But he did not cry out. He could not have cried out had he so desired.

With a motion quick and deft, English Charley had slapped over the detective's mouth and face some tenacious substance like a plaster.

It not only covered his mouth and kept him from crying out, but it covered his eyes and rendered him blind and almost helpless.

Following up his advantage, English Charley, who was now leaping about the detective like a monkey, slapped another plaster on top of the first, and at the same time evaded the blind rush which the desperate detective made in his direction.

The detective heard English Charley's cackling, low laughter, and his rage grew, even as did his distress.

He was like an elephant in the toils. His strength and courage availed nothing.

He turned, as he thought toward the street, intending to run out there, that his appearance might draw attention and help; but when he moved the little jockey tripped him up, and he fell sprawling.

At the same time he heard English Charley give a low whistle.

There was a rush as of muffled feet, and he was jerked from the ground and borne at a running pace along the alley.

In a little while the men stopped, and when he tried to get up again he was struck in the face and bowled over backward, and rough hands secured his feet and wrists with ropes.

He was suffocating to death, he felt. The plaster on his mouth was unyielding. He had clawed at it in wild desperation without affecting it. Now his distended lungs seemed bursting.

A little air was admitted by the plaster, however, else he could not have lived.

"Fine! Fine!" he heard a voice declare—a voice that he recognized as belonging to Captain Hawk. "That's a mighty good make-up. Hereafter I'll know how I look to other eyes."

The speaker stooped down, and, with a knife, slit the plaster, so that a little aperture was given for breathing.

"Now, get everything ready, and we'll put him where his friends won't find him in a while."

CHAPTER XV.

BABYLON BILL ON A DANGEROUS TRAIL.

The Six-Shot Spotter had never been so cleverly trapped. He writhed with humiliation at the thought of how he had been deceived by the jockey.

That he was in great danger he knew, yet when he found he was not to be instantly killed, he began to hope.

The sticky stuff on his face was very annoying, though not very painful.

He was thinking of begging Captain Hawk to remove it, when another command was given, and he was picked up bodily and borne on.

He knew from the sounds of feet that a dozen men were about him.

By devious ways and through ill-lighted

avenues, the road-agents carried the detective toward the borders of the camp.

But they did not succeed in getting out of the place without being seen, as they hoped, and the man who beheld them was, perhaps, the last man in the camp they would have desired to make such a discovery.

It was Babylon Bill.

He was walking along, having but recently come from the rustic cottage, when he observed a number of men slip out of the shadows of a building and hasten in his direction, bearing the form of a man in their midst.

The circumstance was so suspicious that he crept quietly to the top of a convenient pile of lumber, determined to learn what it meant.

The men came straight in his direction, and it began to seem that he would be discovered if he remained there.

He would have been discovered, though, if he had tried to get away, so he stretched himself in an easy posture and calmly awaited their advance.

"I 'low, now, if they drop their peepers on me I kin make a mighty big pertend of it that I'm drunk. 'Twouldn't be the first time that a feller in this hyar camp has h'isted too much red likker an' crawled off in that way."

It seemed to him the explanation would be so plausible and convincing that he really ran very little risk.

The men came straight on, and he was soon able to make out what they were saying. But he could not recognize any of them.

Something of a nervous thrill ran through him when they stopped at the side of the lumber pile.

They put down their burden and began to talk in whispered tones.

"I'll have to go back and attend to that other matter. Take the fellow to the Black Canyon. I want to see him there and have a talk with him. Get him out of town before it's known he's gone."

There was something very mysterious in all this, and Babylon Bill, in order to get a better view, thrust his head farther out.

He dimly beheld the men and their prisoner—the words had assured him it was not a dead body they were carrying—and his curiosity much increased.

Then a startling thing happened. His weight overbalanced the lumber pile, which toppled down with him.

He fell in the midst of the outlaws, and crashed against the prisoner so harshly that a cry was drawn from the latter's lips.

In spite of the disguising twist given to the voice by the slit plaster, it was recognized by Babylon Bill as that of the Six-Shot Spotter.

A realizing sense of what he had done, and of his peril and the peril of the prisoner, swept over him like a flash.

He had sense enough to know that force would avail nothing, and that if he would save himself and this man he must resort to craft.

Therefore, as soon as he could recover from the effects of the fall, he sought to stagger to his feet, exclaiming:

"Let up on that, will ye? Duggun' ye, where's the son of a gun that hit me? I kin lick 'im six days in the week and everlastin'ly wallop the hide off'n 'im on the seventh. Whoop! Hoo-roar. I'm the High Roller Bald Hornet from Brimstone Bar. I'm the Ring-tailed Roarer of the Snow-clad Sierras. I'm—"

He struck out viciously, and his blow, catching one of the outlaws on the chin, bowled him over.

"Come ag'in! One of 'em knocked out, an' t'other's awaitin' to git their medicine. I'm the Whangdoodle mournin' fer her first born."

"Let up on that!" came in the harsh tones of Captain Hawk. "Seize him, men! I believe he's trying to put up a game on us."

The Bald Hornet whirled, with drunken gravity, toward Hawk, and lunged at him with a viciousness that would have sent him to grass if the blow had fallen.

Hawk evaded the blow, caught the hand, jerked heavily at the pretended drunken man, and queried:

"What were you doing on that lumber? Out with it."

He drew and cocked a revolver.

"Pullin' guns, be ye? Duggun' ye, take that! Whenever a man pulls a gun on me I reckon him ez my mortal enemy and act accordin'!"

He knocked the pistol spinning into the dust some distance away, and then, stooping, as if to get out a weapon of his own, he stumbled and fell across the breast of the prisoner.

As he did so, his hands dropped on the strange plaster across the detective's face and mouth, and he touched the cords that held the hands.

He did not get to do more, for he was almost immediately drawn away and stood on his unsteady feet.

"Pardners, I don't wanter hurt any o' ye, but if ye pester me I'll everlastin'ly have to lambast the gizzards out o' the 'hull of you!"

He was seized again by Captain Hawk and jerked, this time away from the prisoner.

Captain Hawk was aware that Babylon Bill had been speaking in a tone so near to shouting that the whole camp would soon be aroused, and, though more than ever convinced that the drunkenness was at least a partial pretense, he had no reason to think that Babylon Bill was the special friend of the detective or knew even who the prisoner was.

As he pulled backward, the others picked up the prisoner and ran with him around the lumber piles and on into the gloom. All except two, who stayed with Captain Hawk, and stood ready to shoot Babylon Bill or execute any other commands given by the chief.

"There's the town, straight before you," announced Hawk. "If you want to save your bacon, walk as straight to it as your feet will carry you. Don't look back, and if you desire to be really healthy in the days to come, say nothing about what you've seen and heard here."

Babylon Bill stared at him with drunken stupidity.

"Git!" was the command, emphasized by the click of a revolver.

Hawk and his men stood with drawn weapons, and Babylon Bill, seeing that wisdom pointed campward just then, reeled in the direction indicated.

Nor did he look back, fearing that such an action might reveal to them more than he wanted them to know.

He did not know who they were, though convinced they were road-agents and enemies of the Six-Shooter, and that the latter was in deadly peril.

As soon as lost to their sight, he hurried straight to the rustic cottage from which, so short a time before, he had emerged.

He found there Ruth and her father, and he had scarcely entered when English Charley came in, with his usual suave bow.

The hour was so late Babylon had feared they would all be in bed.

Ransom, as he observed, appeared to have dropped again into a condition of despairing lethargy.

"Just a word with you, Miss Ruth, an' then I'll take myself away. 'Cordin' to my opinion you're a-thinkin' a heap of sweet things of that there detective, and which, likewise, I've seen it with these two eyes! Well, it's my opinion that he's in despr'it trouble at this very minute!"

Her anxiety was instantly made manifest, proving the truth of his words.

"It's not anything you kin do fer him, only that I want you to go to the marshal of this camp in the mornin' an' say to him that the Six-Shooter has been made a prisoner of by some scoundrels."

"I don't know where he's been taken, ner what fer. The which and why, though, I'm a-goin' to find out."

The revelations interested English Charley quite as much as they did Miss Ruth, though they elicited no questions from Robert Ransom.

English Charley followed Babylon Bill outside and queried him further. But he went back into the house to talk again to Miss Ruth when Babylon Bill hurried away into the night.

The giant was satisfied that it would be perilous and a waste of time to try to follow the trail of the men with the prisoner, for he was well convinced the trail would be guarded and traps laid for the feet of any who should endeavor to pick it out.

He remembered the words of Captain Hawk:

"Take him to the Black Canyon!"

He knew the Black Canyon and the various places where it was likely such a party would go. He had prospected the canyon from top to bottom and from end to end.

Therefore, he left the camp on its opposite side and swung around it in a wide detour; then he bore away toward the lower end of the canyon, to strike it at a point he had figured out as one most favorable for an outlaw stronghold.

CHAPTER XVI.

BABYLON BILL BEWILDERED.

"May I be gizzled!"

Babylon Bill crouched in a rocky depression above the Black Canyon and peered into its depths.

He had struck the canyon about daylight, and had, luckily, come on a trail which he knew to be that of the party he was following.

Now, having crept to this position, he found himself above a lava-ringed circle of level ground, that had an entrance above and below, and through which ran a stream of water.

In this grassy amphitheater, which was nothing else than a dead crater, there were plentiful evidences of human habitation. There were a few tents, several rude houses constructed of lava blocks, and various holes and crannies in the walls resembling the cave dwellings of the Southwest.

But it was none of these things that gave birth to the words quoted.

Seated on a flat rock, within plain view, were two persons, one of whom he knew well. That one was, to all appearances, English Charley.

"Beats my time, that there does. He's as onreli'ble as a circus actor. Down there last night, an' hyar to-day—wonder where he'll be to-morrow?"

A further look convinced him that the man to whom English Charley was talking was none other than the redoubtable Captain Hawk, of whom he had lately so much heard.

He believed that the commander of the party having the prisoner in charge had been Captain Hawk. Therefore, he looked at the man with quite as much interest as at the jockey.

As he looked there came to his mind a queer story, to which he had heretofore paid not much attention.

It was to the effect that there was among the road-agents a little Englishman, with a smooth, boyish face, but who had nerves of iron and the heart of a tiger.

He studied the face closely with this memory in his mind, and though the distance was considerable, he began to think he could see a difference between this man and the little jockey known to the people of Shasta.

When he had watched the pair on the rock for a long time he turned his attention again to the camp, searching it closely for some indication of the presence of the prisoner.

There was no such indication. If the Six-Shooter was held there it was in some of the tents or houses or in some of the holes.

Having come thus far, and being convinced that the Six-Shooter was a prisoner somewhere in the camp if still alive, Babylon's last thought was to turn back without having accomplished his purpose, which was the prisoner's rescue.

He began to study how he might get down into the camp for a closer inspection. The day was yet early, and he could not afford to await the coming of night.

He backed from his position, after a careful study of the situation, descended to lower slopes, and entered the canyon at its northern end, where the stream of water came in.

Creeping from point to point, he at last

came near the place where he had seen Hawk and the little Englishman sitting.

They were gone, and in their place stood a guard, whose presence had not been before manifest.

Babylon Bill gave a little start and then looked back, and was made aware of the fact that he had already passed one guard without knowing it, and without the guard being the wiser.

Feeling the peril of his situation, he began a crawfish movement, but a stone turned under his feet and the guard saw him.

Instantly a rifle went up.

At the moment, a circumstance assisted him that seemed providential. A deer leaped up almost at his feet and ran straight toward the guard.

It disconcerted the guard's aim.

However, the guard fired, but the ball flew wild, and Babylon Bill took to his heels.

The shot aroused the camp. Men tumbled out of the houses and holes, saw the deer running, and began to fire at it, as they fancied the guard had done.

Babylon Bill hurried with all speed into the nearest depression and sought to gain a small pass that he knew to exist in the face of the opposite slope.

But the path he took led him into peril.

Before he knew it, he was face to face with Captain Hawk, who had not been disconcerted by the clamor about the deer, and who now confronted him with drawn revolvers.

"Surrender!"

There was a shot in reply, which was answered instantly by the flash of Hawk's pistols.

Babylon Bill went down in a heap.

One of the bullets had cut through his hat, and, scraping the skull, had left a mark as if a hot iron had been passed along it, and had dropped him with the quickness of a lightning bolt.

Hawk ran up to him for another shot, which he saw was not then needed. Babylon Bill seemed to be dead.

The deer was killed, and it then began to dawn on the outlaws that the shot of the guard had not been fired at the deer, but at an enemy.

They hurried to where Captain Hawk was standing above Babylon Bill.

Before they reached him Babylon Bill recovered consciousness, tried to sit up, and gasped out:

"Thunder! I missed that there deer, and then somebody downed me. Was it you, pardner?"

Hawk frowned in a way that was far from reassuring.

"You fooled me last night, but you'll find it hard work to do it the second time. I suppose you were still drunk when you chased the deer?"

"Drunk? The man what insinuates that the Bald Hornet ever sips mountain dew is a liar from Wayback, an' I kin whip him till his hide won't hold shucks."

CHAPTER XVII.

A CLEVER TURNING OF THE TABLES.

The efforts of Babylon Bill to make the outlaws think he had come there with only innocent intentions were clever enough, but they utterly failed of their purpose.

They were not entirely barren of result, though.

Within a tent, only a short distance away, was the Six-Shooter.

He was bound and helpless, and hourly expecting death.

He might have called out and apprised the big fellow of his presence and condition, only that he feared such a course would increase Babylon Bill's danger.

So he lay quiet, harkening to the wrangle, and praying and hoping that Babylon might be more lucky than himself.

He had been brought to the canyon before daylight. He had not, however, been carried all the way, only to the edge of the camp, where he had been set on his feet and made to walk.

On reaching the canyon, a council had been held, and he had been closely questioned by Captain Hawk concerning the plans and purposes of the 'Frisco authori-

ties, who were then seeking to break up the Shasta road-agents.

These plans the detective refused to reveal, for which refusal he had been tortured in a manner worthy of the Dark Ages.

For some time previous he had been straining at the cords which held him, and now, encouraged by the presence of the High Roller, he began to writhe and strain again.

Just in the shadow of the tent door was a rock with an edge which he thought might act as a knife, if he could only reach it.

He had feared to approach this rock before, as some one seemed always to be watching the tent door, but he knew that now the attention of the camp was drawn to Babylon Bill.

His motions were snail-like, but he succeeded at length in gaining the rock, and began to saw the cords that held his wrists against its serrated edge.

The process was awkward and painful, but soon the cords were cut through, while the voices still came from without, where the chief and his men were wrangling with the Bald Hornet from Brimstone Bar.

The detective stretched out his arms to regain the lost circulation, and then he untied the cords that held his feet.

Hanging against the tent wall was a knife in a sheath.

He took it out, and with a quick, careful stroke, ripped the canvas of the tent.

He looked out on another tent, whose walls hid him from the speakers.

Speedily he cut a hole in this tent and slipped into it. His plans were not well defined. He knew, though, that this tent belonged to Captain Hawk, and he hoped to get possession of weapons, if nothing else.

Then he almost cried out with pleasure. A brace of revolvers lay on a stool, another swung against the wall, while on the cot in the corner lay the coat of mail which had on more than one occasion saved the life of the redoubtable road-agent chief.

It was of steel links, closely interwoven, and of such fine, hard texture that it was able to resist the penetrating power of a rifle ball.

At its side was the padded jacket, over which it was worn, this jacket serving to deaden the force of the impact of bullets.

Without a moment's hesitation the Six-Shot Spotter threw off his coat and slipped into the padded jacket and into the coat of mail.

When he had again drawn on his coat the armor was not visible.

He swelled with returning courage as he buckled one pair of revolvers around his waist and took the other pair in his hands. A box of revolver cartridges that lay near he dropped into a pocket.

The steel-linked coat of mail was comparatively light, while it was almost as pliable as cloth. He believed the weight of it would not in the least interfere with his running abilities.

Babylon Bill was still declaring his fighting powers and asserting that he could whip any man there who doubted the truthfulness of his words, when the Shasta Six-Shooter stepped to the tent door.

The outlaws were crowding about Babylon Bill and were trying to seize him that they might hurl him down and tie him. Evidently the moment for action had arrived.

The revolvers in the hands of the Six-Shooter came up and began to speak with that lightning-like rapidity that had made him so famous throughout all the gold region.

He did not shoot to kill, but only to create a panic and save the life of the giant.

The outlaws fell back as the bullets began to scream above their heads, though some of them tried to get out their weapons.

One fellow, bolder than his companions, stood his ground, and finally tugged out a revolver.

But he did not get to fire it. A bullet from one of the pistols handled by the Six-Shooter smashed into his shoulder and fairly knocked him from his feet.

"Run this way!"

The Six-Shooter shouted this to Babylon Bill, and backed toward the nearest opening out of the cliff-encircled camp.

"Run, and I'll cover your retreat!"

As he thus cried out, a bullet struck him fairly in the breast.

It was from a pistol in the hand of Captain Hawk, and but for the coat of mail, it would have ended the career of the Shasta Six-Shooter then and there.

Babylon Bill was not slow to take advantage of the excitement. He ran toward the Six-Shooter, who had so opportunely appeared.

As he passed, the latter threw him a revolver, and cried:

"Make for that first outlet. I'll follow you. Get along, on the jump."

The road-agents were badly rattled, and no pursuit would have been made had it not been for Captain Hawk.

Hawk was a man who seldom lost his head. Now he blazed away at the retreating men, and shouted his commands with such fierceness and anger that his followers rallied.

The detective had turned about and was running after Babylon Bill at his best gait.

He soon caught up with him.

"Make your feet fly, old fellow! There's nobody in that cleft, and if we can reach it, I think we are safe!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

"HAS ENGLISH CHARLEY A DOUBLE?"

It was a hurried retreat, and it was successful. Fear of the pistol expertness of the Six-Shot Spotter kept the outlaws from evincing too much enthusiasm in the pursuit. They contented themselves with rather long range firing, and when the fleeing men had gained the cleft and disappeared, the road-agents hesitated for some time before venturing up to the mouth of the cleft, through a fear that the terrible pistol king might be laying for them there.

But the Shasta Six-Shooter did not tarry to spread any nets for the feet of the people of the lava camp. All he desired was to get away from there. His limbs were still racked by the tortures to which he had been subjected, and to linger in the vicinity would avail nothing.

When he and Babylon Bill had got clear of immediate danger, they made their way by devious circuits back to Shasta.

The trails were terrible, and much time was consumed in the task.

As soon as they reached the camp they proceeded to the Ransom cottage, where they were met by Ruth and her father.

On their way there they had talked much of the mystery presented by the conduct of English Charley, for the detective was certain the little jockey they had seen at the house of the Ransoms was the same individual beheld in the road-agent camp, and the same who had attacked him in the room back of Hop Sing's laundry, and had slapped the plaster over his mouth.

Their astonishment, therefore, may be imagined when they drew near the cottage and saw Miss Ruth talking to the jockey.

They stopped in bewilderment and looked questioningly at each other.

They had consumed a great deal of time, as has been stated, in their journey from the lava camp—time which might readily have been utilized by the jockey in getting there, over more familiar trails.

But had the jockey done that? Was this the same individual they had beheld that morning in the outlaw stronghold?

"I shall put some mighty straight questions to him."

With this declaration the detective walked on again, narrowly watching English Charley as he talked to the girl beside the door.

As they drew nearer, the jockey calmly bowed, as serene as a May morning, and greeted them with his customary affability.

The detective looked him full in the face.

"I thought I saw you, not so long ago, up the mountain side. Your presence here astonishes me."

English Charley lifted his eyebrows questioningly, and opened his blue eyes.

"Me? Oh, you must have seen me when I was out hunting? Yes, I was up in the hills a little while this morning trying to

get a shot at some grouse. I got back a short time ago."

"It wasn't that," with much sternness. "You were not hunting. You had no gun. Were you not in the mouth of the Black Canyon?"

English Charley fell back, with a look that was half of anger.

"I don't mind telling you just where I went, though I don't see that it's any of your business. Since when did you become my father confessor? I wasn't near the Black Canyon. I was on the slope just over there."

The detective was quite as anxious to have a talk with Miss Ruth, as he was to spar, without profit, with the little jockey, and when the invitation was given, he went on into the house with Babylon Bill.

English Charley looked after him a moment, then lifted his cap, bowed to the girl, and departed toward the camp.

"Where has Charley been all night?—if I'm not presumptuous in making the inquiry?"

Ruth, who had heard his previous questions with much surprise, looked at him inquiringly, as she answered:

"In his room, I suppose. And he was out on the hills, there, as he said, this morning. Why did you question him so sharply?"

Ransom came into the room and prevented a reply, and Ruth got up, in much distress.

Ransom was greatly changed for the worse. He looked almost as if stricken with a mortal illness. His step was unsteady, his cheeks and his eyes bright with a strange, half-maniacal glare.

Babylon Bill and the detective regarded him with pitying surprise.

Ruth's anxiety about her father was painfully manifest, and when he had strolled out of doors and Babylon Bill had gone on into the camp, she turned to the detective.

"I can't tell you how much I fear for him. He was very restless last night, and I hardly got to sleep a wink. I'm afraid he's losing his mind."

She needed an experienced adviser, and, sitting down, she told the detective so, though she kept back the history and mystery of the crown.

The Six-Shooter could not longer restrain the love he had so suddenly conceived for this charming woman. It shone from his eyes.

"You need some one to fight these battles for you, Miss Ruth, if you never did before. Let me be that one!"

A blush suffused her face and neck, and she sought to withdraw the hand that he caught up.

"You—you don't know what you say!" she stammered. "You would not tell me that if—oh, my God, what am I saying?"

With desperate energy she snatched away the hand and rose from the chair.

"If I have hurt you I sincerely beg your pardon! I assure you my intentions are honorable. I have learned to love you—"

She gasped out a remonstrance.

"It is not that! I do not question your motives. But you don't know us—you don't—"

She sank to the chair and burst into tears, much to his bewilderment and distress.

How he desired to put an arm about her and comfort her! But he only said:

"I am willing to wait. Perhaps I was premature. Only remember, always, that I love you. Now, we will talk no more about it."

She averted her gaze and was silent, but he could see she was not angry.

"Does the—the mystery pertain to English Charley? There is a mystery about him, I am sure."

She started as if stung, and all the color suddenly went out of her face.

With a pain at his heart, he wondered if she were in love with the little jockey. He had not before thought of that as a possibility.

"In what way?" she stammered.

"Is there another person in these mountains who looks like him, who dresses like him?"

"I'm sure I don't know. Why do you ask?"

"There is another who looks and dresses like him and herds with the road-agents, or English Charley is himself one of them."

He watched the color as it came and went in her expressive face. He saw that she was surprised, and he saw, too, that she did not believe English Charley guilty of wrong-doing.

"There must be another, then," she declared. "I heard a story like that once before, but scoffed at it. This I know, though: English Charley has been with us a long while, and he is perfectly honest and trustworthy."

"Then he has a double."

"It must be so."

CHAPTER XIX.

"THE CHINESE MUST GO!"

The Six-Shot Spotter was turning away from the cabin when he was clutched nervously by the shoulder.

He started, for he had heard no step.

Wheeling about, he confronted Robert Ransom.

Ransom's grip tightened. His eyes fairly blazed with excitement.

"Sir, you must not think of marrying my daughter. Promise me you will not seriously consider such a thing. I heard what you said."

Ransom's nervous earnestness was so great that he fairly shook.

"Promise me, sir. Promise me."

The detective hesitated. So strange a request was not to be answered off-hand.

"You would never think of such a thing if you knew our history—if you knew of the dark stain on the family name."

"I will promise not to be in any haste to speak to her on the subject again."

Ransom grasped his hand.

"You can do me a great favor. Save me from my enemies!"

"I love your daughter, Mr. Ransom, and for her sake will aid you all I can, in an honorable way. Tell me how I may serve you. Who are your enemies?"

"Peter Bendigo was the worst. Now he is dead. But as true as there is a God, I did not kill him. I had no hand in that bloody deed!"

The detective did not doubt the speaker's sincerity or honesty, but he did doubt his sanity. He reasoned that Ransom might have shot Bendigo in a temporary fit of lunacy, and be utterly forgetful of the fact now.

The detective gave the outstretched hand a reassuring pressure, but did not otherwise reply.

"There's another I'm afraid of. That's Hop Sing. He's no ordinary Chinaman. He once lived in Bombay and in Calcutta. He's an enemy to fear."

The detective started. He had had, himself good reason to fear Hop Sing. His neck was still sore from the cord of the strangler.

"Listen here," advancing and whispering the words. "Have you not noticed that the Chinamen are growing more numerous? The town and the mountain are full of them. They compose most of the road-agent force. I tell you, they will yet take Shasta!"

He drew back to note the effect of his words, and more than ever the detective was convinced that the man was insane or on the verge of insanity.

"I'm going to rouse the people against them. I've already done a good deal of talking, and it's having its effect. The Chinese must go!"

He stepped quickly past the detective, and hurried down to the camp in advance of him.

The detective looked back at the house, expecting Ruth Ransom to come out for the purpose of restraining her father's wild impulse.

She did not, and he walked on down the bowldered slope, thinking of Ransom's rather erratic statements and following him with his eyes.

There were many things to do, the first being to call on the marshal of the camp and fully acquaint him with all that had occurred since last they had met.

But he halted in the middle of the street, when the camp was gained, for there, on

a dry goods box, with a crowd gathering about him, was Robert Ransom.

Ransom was talking and gesticulating wildly, and roundly denouncing the Chinese.

Strangely enough, as it seemed, his angry assertions were greeted with applause.

It was not difficult, however, to raise a tumult against John Chinaman, for though this occurred before the sand lot agitation, John was already pretty well hated on the Pacific coast.

The doings of Hop Sing and his associates had not tended to make the people of Shasta think well of the breed.

"Down with the Chinese!" was yelled, as the detective drew near, and Robert Ransom, leaping from the box, started toward Hop Sing's laundry, at the head of a hastily-gathered mob.

"That will never do at all! I don't want to fight Hop Sing and his gang in that way!"

The detective looked frowningly at the men who were making the wrathful rush.

Then he followed them as rapidly as possible, and reached Hop Sing's before they had time to do any damage.

Not a Chinaman was visible. They had taken the alarm and had scudded into their holes like rats.

The door was loudly pounded, and orders shouted for the Chinese to make their appearance.

"Come out hyar and take ye'r medicine!" yelled a whisky-soaked bum, whose appearance was so disreputable that the lowest Chinaman might with reason have been ashamed to be seen with him.

John did not choose to come out and take his "medicine," and forthwith a beam was brought to bear on the door, and the door was reduced to splinters.

As it flew from its fastenings the crowd rolled into the front room.

At that juncture the marshal of the camp arrived. But he was a cautious individual who knew on which side his bread was buttered, and so did not try to restrain the fury of the mob.

However, not a Chinaman could be found. They had apparently dived into the ground, and, for all any one could say to the contrary, had gone on straight down to the Celestial land from whence they came.

The mob searched and swore and thumped and pounded at the walls, but they could not find the secret doors, if there were any, and finally beat a retreat and solaced themselves with the vile liquor sold at the nearest bar.

CHAPTER XX.

SOME UNPLEASANT BEDFELLOWS.

Babylon Bill kissed his hand gallantly to Mrs. McCulish and backed along the corridor toward his room.

The hour was rather late. He had already passed more than an hour in the witching presence of the amiable landlady and had torn himself away with much snapping of heartstrings.

"Arrah, now, yez didn't forgit anything, did yez?"

"Hanged if I didn't! I ain't got any more sense'n a pig in a poke!"

He pranced back with the grace of an elephant, and then, catching Mrs. McCulish around the waist, in a loving hug, implanted on her slightly withered lips a resounding smack!"

"Ye crazy spalpeen that ye air!" struggling redly from his grasp and smoothing back her tousled hair. "Who towld yez ye had leave to do a thing loike that, now, I dun'no'? Sure, it wasn't mesilf."

"When a bee sees a flower he can't help flyin' to it, an' when the bald hornet—"

"Yez air thot big a fule thot yez don't know it, an' it don't hurt ye. There's what I called ye back to git!"

She threw a slipper at him—a slipper she had spent weary hours in making, and which was meant to be worn on the wall instead of on his feet, and to hold his pipe and tobacco instead of his corns.

Thereupon he kissed her again, which she did not seem to consider an insult, and then he backed once more down the corri-

dor, tossing other kisses at her from the tips of his knobby fingers.

He was in great good humor, though he was so tired he could have lain down on a cactus bed and fallen asleep without extra effort. He had rescued the Shasta Six-Shooter from his enemies, and—he could never forget it—he had asked Mrs. McCulish to name the day, and she had consented.

Entering his room, he began to throw back the covers of the bed and to stoop to remove his boots, without having lighted a lamp.

As he did this something soft slipped out of the bed and dropped to the floor with a thud.

It was a very suggestive sound, and the giant grew undeniably shaky.

He grew shakier still, and let out a roar that was heard to the street a moment later.

The thing that had dropped to the floor began to whirr—r—r like a sliver on a fence, and he knew that it was a rattlesnake.

Another answered it from the center of the ebd, and another from a corner of the room.

The giant leaped two or three feet into the air, and a good three yards from the spot at a bound, and then stood stock still, shaking like a leaf.

He was no coward, but there is nothing that takes the nerve out of a man like the unexpected warning of a rattlesnake.

He heard the pattering of feet in the corridor, and then Mrs. McCulish's voice at the bedroom door.

"For Heaven's sake keep out of hyar! I'm a reg'lar Dan'el in the lions' den, with snakes instid of— Look out! There's one singin' by the door!"

Mrs. McCulish drew back with a shriek and ran down the corridor calling for help.

Babylon Bill pulled himself together, screwed up his courage, and struck a match which he fished from a pocket.

Surveying the apartment, he saw there were no snakes between himself and the table. With a bound he leaped to it and lighted a lamp.

There were just four rattlers in the room, as he could now tell. And, when he could see and locate them, and the lamp cast its rays into the corners, his fears largely departed.

There was a knobbed walking stick in the room that had belonged to some previous occupant, and with this he attacked the reptiles and quickly placed two of them beyond the power of injuring any one.

Mrs. McCulish was again at the door, backed by a number of lodgers and by people drawn into the house by Babylon Bill's outcry.

She poked her head through the door and stared at the dead snakes.

Then her eyes twinkled.

"I toul't ye ye'd have thim, if ye didn't quit dhrinkin'!"

She pushed farther into the room, and saw, what Babylon Bill had not yet seen, a sheet of paper with writing on it, pinned to one of the pillows.

The two living snakes had crawled back under the bed to get away from the light, where they could still be heard rattling.

She pointed to the paper, and Babylon Bill tore it from its place.

It read:

"Take warning! You interfered in business last night that didn't concern you! We don't have any idea that these snakes will do more than give you a little scare, but they will impress on you the fact that we can reach you when you are not thinking about it. Our fight with the fellow who calls himself the Shasta Six-Shooter is not your concern. If you don't want to lose your life keep out of it. We're not joking!"

This was signed "The Road-Agents of the Shasta Trail."

Babylon Bill stared at it in considerable amazement, then thrust it into the hands of Mrs. McCulish.

The room was rapidly filling with people, and several, who heard the snakes still rattling, got the knotted stick, and, pushing the bed aside, attacked them.

Mrs. McCulish looked at the giant with feelings of mingled fear and joy.

She began to realize that he had had a narrow escape, and now this note told her that greater dangers lay ahead of him.

For the shrewd Irish widow knew that Babylon Bill would not heed the road-agent warning. He was not that kind of a man. Although a good deal of a blow-hard, he had a certain bulldog tenacity of purpose, which, when it directed him, made him an inflexible and dangerous foe.

CHAPTER XXI.

BABYLON BILL IN WAR PAINT.

Though Babylon Bill had gone to his room as sleepy as a hoot owl, he was now as wide awake as if no thought of slumber had ever crossed his mind.

He crumpled up and put away the threatening note, then took Mrs. McCulish aside and closely questioned her.

So far as she knew, no one had that day gone near the room except the chambermaid, and it seemed preposterous to think the chambermaid had put the rattlesnakes in the bed and on the floor.

It was patent, though, that some one had surreptitiously gained access to the apartment.

Unable to learn anything, Babylon Bill thrust the note into a pocket, and went out into the streets.

He wanted to see and confer with the Shasta Six-Shooter, but, unable to do that, he went into the nearest saloon and, calling for a big sheet of manila paper, he spread it out on a billiard table.

Then, in the presence of a curious crowd and in a big round hand, he copied the notice on the sheet of manilla, and went with it into the street.

With the manila elevated, like a banner, on a pole, close to a street lamp, so that all might read, Babylon Bill mounted to a box and began a speech.

"Look at that there, feller pilgrims! A threat like that against the Bald Hornet from Brimstone Bar! Kin sich things be?"

He glared around with questioning gravity.

"Who owns this hyar town, anyway? The citizens what built the houses, er the road-agents what hides in the hills?"

"I say hides in the hills, an', when I say it, I know what I'm talkin' about. I have seen the lion in his den, the eagle in his lair! I poked my nose into the devil's stew-pot, and the devil he was there!"

With this outburst of poetical eloquence Babylon Bill again pointed to the copy of the note on manila paper, and, in his characteristic way, told what he had seen and heard in the lava-ringed camp.

He made one exception, though—he did not speak of English Charley, or of the question of English Charley's double.

"But, feller trav'lers, they're not only there—they're hyar! They're in this hyar camp! They had a meetin'-place back of Hop Sing's laundry, as I'm ready to swear I believe!"

"But you'll not find them there now, nor in the camp in the hills! The road-agents of Shasta ain't anybody's fools, not by a duggun' sight!"

"Now, what shall I do? Vamoose the country, er stay hyar an' fight it out?"

Again he stretched forth his arms appealingly, believing he had carried the crowd with him, when a rotten apple, hurled by what hand and from what place no one knew, struck him full in the chest.

His flood of eloquence was brought to a termination. He looked about and gave utterance to an angry bellow, as he wiped the apple from his coat.

"Pardners an' feller-citizens, as great Caesar said, when he tumbled into the dust, 'that was the most unkindest cut of all!'"

"If the feller what throwed that will show hisself I'll trade him a bullet fer his apple, an' if he don't show hisself he's a duggun' coward, with no more soul than a catfish!"

He took down the paper, rolled away the box, and went into the nearest saloon, where he solaced himself for the insult by treating all around and taking two or three drinks himself.

His ferocity seemed to grow as the liquor

mounted to his head, and, from that time on he reeled from bar to bar, breathing out threatenings and slaughter against his enemies.

In this condition, in the wee sma' hours of the morning, Mrs. McCulish found him.

He was on a doorstep, a crowd was again about him, and he was reciting his woes for the hundredth time.

"Pardners, I'm huntin' fer the man what struck Billy Patterson!"

The crowd parted, and he stared as if he thought the man wanted was about to appear.

Instead, Mrs. McCulish showed her red Irish face, aflame with anger.

"Yez air thryin' to p'ison ye'r little brain so thot yeez can see more snakes. I'm thinkin'!" she howled, as she advanced.

Babylon Bill hopped down off his perch and looked about for a way of escape. There was none. The crowd hedged him in.

Mrs. McCulish came straight up to him, heedless of the exclamations of those who stood by, and, taking him by the ear, drew him along at her side.

He gave a bellow of pain and shook off her grasp; then he straightened up with drunken gravity.

"See hyar, womern! Wha—wha's the diff' to you, if I see a whole men—menagerie of snakes? Tha—that's what I'd like to know! You're (hic) you're enticin' me like Eve in the garden! You're (hic) you're a-tryin' fer to cut my hair like the Queen of Sheba did Joner's! That's what you're a-tryin' to do—an' I wo—won't have it!"

She paid no heed to his words, but gave the ear another yank, and led him from the place to the boarding-house.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE EXPLOSION OF A BOMB.

The Six-Shot Spotter sat as if frozen to his chair, staring in mystified and dumb wretchedness at a letter he held in his hands.

He was now domiciled at Mrs. McCulish's, and his room was but a short distance from that of Babylon Bill.

A busy day and night had passed since his adventures with the road-agents, during which time he had hardly gone near the Ransom cottage.

As for the road-agents, Captain Hawk and all his followers—with the exception of certain Chinamen and others against whom no charges could be lodged—seemed to have disappeared from the face of the earth.

The letter was from Ruth Ransom; it had been brought to the boarding-house by a boy, though the boy had not delivered it to the detective in person, and it ran as follows:

"Mr. Thomas Wagnell: Dear sir—When you receive this note I shall be gone from Shasta. I thank you very much for your kindness. I believe I appreciate the honor you have conferred on me when you declared your love and asked if I would marry you. Believe me when I say that, under other and happier conditions, I should be glad to consider the proposal. But it cannot be so now. There are certain things which I am not at liberty to state that are a bar to anything of the kind, and because of them, and because I think it best for myself and my father, I have decided to say good-by to you and to all the other good friends we have in the camp of Shasta. Please do not try to trace us. It will be utterly useless, and will be, besides, annoying to
Yiurs truly,
"RUTH RANSOM."

The Shasta Six-Shooter read the letter over and over till the very words seemed burned into his brain.

Then he sat, fumbling at it, sick and giddy, and with a great pain at his heart.

There was but one thing to which he could attribute this eccentric action. That was the mental condition of Robert Ransom. He had been more than half driven to the belief that back of Ransom's mental state there lay the shadow of a crime. Not the murder of the scoundrel Bendigo, but something else, of which the detective was ignorant.

The Shasta Six-Shooter was not familiar with Ruth Ransom's handwriting, and he thought this letter might be a fake of some kind, put forward by English Charley, who had possibly overheard his proposal to Miss Ruth.

Traps were so thick about his feet that the detective was inclined to look upon everything as a trap.

He folded the letter carefully, put it in an inner pocket, where it nestled close down against the coat of mail, and then left the house.

He kept his eyes wide open as he went along the street, but saw nothing to make him think there was anything out of the way.

His destination was the Ransom cottage, and, when he reached it, he found English Charley sitting by the door with chair tipped back against the logs, as smiling and joyous as if all the world were but a playground.

The door stood open, but there appeared to be no one in the house.

The Six-Shooter stopped and put a question or two to the little man.

English Charley pushed his cap back from his brow and looked up with his mild blue eyes.

"About all I know is that I'm out of a job—and here I thought I was fixed for life! I wouldn't have been more surprised if old Shasta had vomited its heart out!"

He thrust a hand languidly into a pocket and drew out a letter which seemed a counterpart of the one the Shasta Six-Shooter had received.

This he opened and handed to the detective.

It was, however, a polite letter of dismissal, in which regrets were expressed that his services were no longer needed.

"When and how did you get that?"

"I found the door open and that lying on the table, addressed to me, when I came home late last night."

"And you don't know where they have gone?"

"Never a bit of it!"

"Did they take the stage?"

"I didn't trouble to ask, pardner! I couldn't see that it made any difference to me whether they took the stage or walked, so long as they hadn't asked me to go with them!"

"Well, what do you propose to do now?"

"Stay right here, in this cabin, or at a boarding house. You'll observe they gave me the privilege of remaining at the cabin until it's sold."

The Shasta Six-Shooter looked keenly at the little man, whose manner was so light-hearted and debonnaire. There was apparently in the little man's heart no regret at the departure of the Ransoms.

On the other hand, the detective was fairly crushed. It seemed a terrible thing to him that Ruth Ransom had gone away in that manner, and into his mind there leaped a determination to disregard her request.

He was mentally busy, too, with thoughts suggested by the mystery of English Charley's double. Was the blue-eyed jockey before him really a road-agent?

"Look here! There's one doubt you can help me set at rest! Have you a double?"

The jockey's blue eyes opened wide. He was an innocent youngster or else he was an excellent actor!

"Put that a little clearer, won't you?"

"No doubt you've heard about how I was in the toils of the road-agents recently? Well, there was among them a little fellow of about your size, who looked for all the world like you. It has struck me that it might have been you!"

He bent on English Charley a piercing glance, as if he would read him through and through.

But if English Charley had anything to conceal he was equal to the occasion, and met the look smilingly.

"I've heard a little story like that myself. It's deuced convenient, too, sometimes, to have a fellow that looks like you. I found that out, coming down from Frisco about a month ago."

"I came in the regular stage, which was

held up at the divide by the road-agents, who went through every fellow there except me. I looked so much like one of their pards, who, it seemed, was not with the band at the time, that they let me go, thinking I was that identical chap!"

"It might be deuced inconvenient for you if Judge Lynch should get hold of you some time and make the mistake of thinking that you were the road-agent!"

English Charley laughed in a cooing way, as if he thought the suggestion a very merry and novel one.

"Oh, it wouldn't be laughing matter!"

"No; I suppose not! And, now, let me ask you a question. I heard not long ago, that you were playing the game of double. That you were this celebrated Captain Hawk?"

"Look here!" clutching English Charley by the shoulder. "Answer me true, and look at me while you're giving the answer. I did play that game of Captain Hawk! I went into that den back of the laundry, and you—you—you came in there and pointed out to the others the fact that I wasn't the man I pretended to be! You did that! You needn't lie to me and say that you didn't!"

His clutch so tightened that English Charley was fairly lifted from his feet.

"Oh, I say! Let up on that, will you? What the deuce are you trying to pinch my shoulder off for? If you're not going to believe what I say, why, I might as well not say anything!"

He was angered by the painful grip of the detective's fingers, and probably also by the doubt so strongly expressed.

"Didn't you come into that room back of Hop Sing's, and didn't you point me out to the men there?"

"No, I say! No!"

English Charley shot out the words with bitter emphasis.

"And more, I don't care to be insulted in that sort of style, nor danced about here as if I were a little boy! You've been sent down here as a smart chap to get at certain facts. You're counting me into your facts. Count away and be hanged to you!"

There was a fiery glint in the blue eyes, and his anger was growing.

So far as getting at the truth was concerned, the Shasta Six-Shooter felt that he was no nearer than he had been before. He doubted English Charley more than ever. If there was any difference in his mental situation he was more strongly inclined to the belief that English Charley was a member of the road-agent band.

He had accomplished nothing. The mystery of the disappearance of Ruth Ransom and her father was as deep as ever. Oppressed by this failure and by the contents of the letter she had sent him, he went back to the camp.

He found that the news of their disappearance was already spreading, though the people did not know where they had gone.

He speedily convinced himself that they had not gone away on the stage.

He could not find in what manner they had left the place, and this suggested foul play.

As he worked at the mystery he came in contact with an attorney, who was quite as much of a saloon bum as a lawyer, and who had a little upstairs office which the detective had more than once visited.

"You're wanting to know what became of those Ransoms? I heard that you'd been making inquiries at the livery stables! There! How is that for a pointer?"

He pushed some pieces of legal writing across the table to the Six-Shot Spotter.

They proved to be deeds, duly executed, and signed by Ruth and her father, which conveyed the Happy Thought Mine, together with the rustic cottage and the ground on which it stood to the little Englishman, Charles Berwick.

The detective's head fairly swam as he examined them.

"What do they suggest?" the lawyer asked.

The deeds had been drawn by the lawyer the day before, and the notes of the recorder showed they had been placed on the records.

"They suggest that English Charley is the biggest liar in this camp! He pretended a great deal of ignorance, and I don't doubt if I taxed him with a thing of this kind he would have denied it. He's an angel-faced devil, I'm afraid!"

"He's a devil that's feathering his own nest! I thought there might be something crooked about the things when I wrote them, but it wasn't my business to say anything. Ransom looked more like a ghost than a live man and acted a good deal more like a lunatic than a man of sense."

"You think there was fraud?"

The lawyer hesitated.

"Well, I shouldn't want to go as far as that. It was mighty queer, though."

"Was Ruth Ransom with them? Did she sign that in your presence?"

"Yes."

That settled the question of fraud, so far as the detective was concerned. He was ready to swear that Ruth Ransom would never lend herself to anything that was not honest and above board.

When he had further queried the lawyer he left the office and hastened back to the rustic cottage, resolved to have it out with the little Englishman and get the truth, if it was at all obtainable.

"I'll choke the lying heart out of him if he don't tell me!"

But when he got to the cottage he found the door locked and Berwick gone.

CHAPTER XXIII.

IN THE HAWK'S NEST.

The Six-Shot Spotter leaped to some quick conclusions and acted on them. Whether they were right or wrong the developments of the story will show.

Standing in the darkness of his own room, fitting to his person the flexible coat of mail, he thought the whole situation over, as he had already done a dozen times.

He believed that Berwick was a member of the road-agent band, and had no double; and he believed, further, that by some fraudulent means the transfer of the property had been made; and that, now, the Ransoms were held as prisoners by the agents, if, indeed, the outlaws had not put them out of the way.

It was in many respects a reasonable theory. He was convinced that the Happy Thought was a valuable mine. It was worth some risks to the road-agents to get hold of this property.

As for the letter written by Ruth, in which she spoke of her disappearance from Shasta and asked him not to try to trace her, that might have been written under coercion.

The handwriting was hers, as was proven by the signatures to the deeds; otherwise he would have thought the letter a forgery.

A high and low search, throughout all the camp, had failed to unearth the boy who had brought the letter to the boarding house. The one servant who had seen him had not given him a second glance, and so, of course, could furnish little help in the search.

Having donned the coat of mail and seen to it that his revolvers, on which his life so often depended, were in perfect working order, the Six-Shooter sallied out into the camp.

It presented its usual appearance. Life roared in its crooked, rocky streets in quite a Wild West way. The saloons and dance-houses were filled to overflowing.

The detective paid no attention to any of these things, but went on up town, intending to have another talk with the attorney who had showed him the deeds.

As he did so he passed the establishment of Hop Sing.

Hop had ventured back, for the effervescing anger against the Chinamen had subsided, and none of the police officers were ready to put Hop under arrest for complicity with the road-agents.

Hop was a shrewd Celestial, who could be counted on to tell which way the wind was blowing as well as any one.

The Shasta Six-Shooter stopped in the shadows and gave a low whistle of surprise, for, stealing along near the build-

ings, as if just come from Hop's, was a figure he had good cause to remember—the figure of Captain Hawk.

Instantly his decision was taken. He would follow Captain Hawk again and try to make a discovery of some value. Would try to discover the whereabouts of Ruth Ransom and her father.

Captain Hawk was gone almost as soon as seen, but the detective had not failed to note the way he was going, and could guess shrewdly at the point in the hills which the outlaw would likely strike.

He loosened one of his revolvers and hurried along after Captain Hawk.

Hardly had he turned the corner of the building, however, when he was again brought to a halt, this time by the drawling voice of Babylon Bill, keyed to a whisper:

"I say, pardner, I'm with you, if you're willin'! I seen him, same as you did!"

But for this interruption the Shasta Six-Shooter would probably have passed Babylon Bill without notice, or have thought him only a rock.

Now he crouched at Babylon's side.

"Where did he go? Which way?"

"Yan way—toward the lower gorge."

"It's as I thought! You say you want to go with me?"

"If so be that you're willin'! I've got a crow to pick with that there Captain Hawk myself!"

The Six-Shooter was in a fever of impatience, but he controlled his desire to hurry on, and asked another question.

"What have you learned since I last saw you? Have you found out anything more about Miss Ruth and her father?"

"Nary! Neither has the widder. An', when that widder balks on anything like that, you may know that it's a stone-cold trail! She's been hyar an' there an' everywhere, askin' all sorts of questions!"

"Purely through kindness, I suppose?"

"Purely because she's a woman what likes to mix in a little gossip! But, heave on there, if I'm to go with you, er the captain'll give us the slip yit!"

Both "heaved on," and were soon out of the camp and in the hills.

At a pass through which they were sure the outlaw chief had passed they halted and remained until morning.

Then they picked up his trail and pushed ahead.

It led toward the higher slopes of Mount Shasta—evidence that the lava-ringed camp had been abandoned and a new one formed.

Sticking to the trail like a pair of bloodhounds, they came, about noon, on another crater-like spot, ringed about by cliffs.

This crater was, however, set in the very edge of Shasta's snows.

All about it were lava ridges, some of them seeming but recently hardened, and within the valley itself more than a dozen pits or hollows sent up little columns of smoke and steam.

"A reg'lar devil's tea-kettle, pardner!"

"Some of that fire wouldn't be bad, though, jist at this minute."

He shrugged his shoulders and rubbed his hands, for, though the sun was bright, the air up there was sharp and frosty.

The same tents they had before seen were in this new camp, though the outlaws had not had time to erect any log houses. But there were many lava holes, that probably led to caverns, large and small, that would serve as well as houses.

From their secure position the Shasta Six-Shooter and Babylon Bill studied the location of the camp with all its visible inlets and outlets, and scrutinized the outlaws keenly as they came and went.

There was one tent which seemed to be guarded, and, when they had watched it a long time, they reached the conclusion that in this tent Ruth and her father were held as prisoners.

Not more than a dozen outlaws were visible throughout the day. Whether any one of these was Captain Hawk or not, the distance was too great to determine—though Captain Hawk had been trailed there.

As darkness drew on they descended from their high perch, intending to enter the camp and effect the rescue of the prisoners.

They were guided by the glow from the lava holes and by the camp-fires that the road-agents started.

Babylon Bill smacked his lips. Both he and the detective were as hungry as mountain wolves, for they had set out on this journey without premeditation and preparation.

"Some of that truck sizzlin' on them fires I'm bound to have, if I've got to fight fer it. I don't think I ever was so hungry sence I commenced to eat meat!"

While the glare of the fire and the lava holes guided them, it also made their task peculiarly difficult.

They passed down through a wide gorge, in which they felt sure a sentinel was posted. It was very dark in there, however, and in this they trusted.

Suddenly the Six-Shooter, who was in the lead, sank to the earth like a feather and lay perfectly still.

Then Babylon Bill heard the steps of the sentry.

The sentry had become suspicious—probably had heard them—and came in their direction.

It was a critical moment. The sentry came straight on and discovery seemed the only thing possible.

But at that moment a boulder, released and sent on its way by the hand of the detective, went bounding down the slope.

The detective jumped backward, as the sentry looked after the boulder, and gave out a yelp like a startled wolf.

Then he half-rolled and half-hopped down the slope, on the farther side.

The sentry saw him and fired at him, thinking him a wolf, but fearing he might be a man.

Fortunately, the ball struck too high, and then a cliffy wall hid him from the sentry's sight, and he sank down in a hollow, where he lay as still as death.

Babylon Bill was not slow to take advantage of the diversion.

While the attention of the guard was drawn to the seeming wolf, he crept with marvelous stealth and celerity for one of his size and build, down the slope, following the route taken by the boulder, and shortly found himself on a shelf.

Here a path ran close along a wall—a narrow, ledgy place; but it descended lower and lower, and was not watched; and by means of it he came into the wider mouth of the gorge.

The shot brought some men out from the camp.

Lying in concealment, Babylon Bill heard the guard explain to them that he had been frightened by a wolf, at which he had shot, but that it had got away.

This brought relief. The detective had not been killed or discovered.

While Babylon Bill was wondering how he should proceed to put himself in communication with his companion, the latter crawled out of some brush not far away and came to him.

"I saw you creep into this hole," was whispered. "I was higher up, and so could see you, for it chanced that you came between me and one of the fires."

"A lucky thing I didn't git between the guard an' one of the fires, then! If that had happened, I reckon I'd be wearin' a bullet in my innards, 'bout now."

The statement of the sentry that the thing he had fired at was but a wolf relieved the scare that existed, though it drew from the outlaw leader, who considered such a thing reckless and reprehensible, a sharp reprimand.

That outlaw leader was Captain Hawk, and he stood not a dozen paces from the hidden men when the reprimand was delivered.

As Hawk went back into the valley, the detective and his pard followed close on his heels—grown so bold by the good luck that had attended them that they arose to their feet and stepped almost in his steps, though they were cautious to keep a goodly distance behind.

Hawk went to the tent they suspected, but did not tarry there long.

When he came out of it and went to another, the intruders crept close up to the suspected tent, hugging the earth now as if their very existence depended on it.

The glare of a lava hole that was not far away made them extra cautious.

This was a strange subterranean outlet. A hot water stream seemed to roll out of a fissure, whose mouth was half the time hidden by a cloud of vapor and smoke. Behind this cloud a lurid glare was seen.

When the cloud of steam and smoke rolled between them and the subterranean fire, the detective and Babylon Bill hitched forward with reckless speed, but when the cloud fell back and the glare reddened the rocks, they flattened themselves on the ground like lizards.

Moving forward in this eccentric way, they reached the tent.

At the back of the tent, flat on his face, Babylon Bill lay, while the Shasta Six-Shooter crawled slowly around to the tent door, for the purpose of looking in and perhaps entering.

Unfortunately for his plans, there was in the tent no light, and no sounds came to tell him if it was occupied or not.

Unable to make certain these points, the detective stopped at the tent door, pulled it softly open, thrust in his head, and then whispered:

"Ransom! Miss Ruth! Are you here?"

If they were there they assuredly did not reply.

A great sense of disappointment oppressed the Six-Shooter. To have risked so much and come so far with only this as the result!

He lay quite still, and fancied he heard a sound like suppressed breathing, such a sound as might have come from some one gagged.

It struck him with a shock, and immediately suggested that a prisoner lay in the tent, gagged and helpless.

He was bound to find out who that prisoner was, and to help him, whether known or unknown.

Feeling thus, he crawled slowly into the tent on his hands and knees, guided by that strange sound.

As he did so, he felt himself grasped by more than one pair of strong hands and thrown down.

Instantly he sent up a cry for help.

Then it seemed the tent was filled with men.

Though overwhelmed with surprise, he fought with the courage of desperation.

But his struggles would not have availed had it not been for the help rendered by Babylon Bill.

Babylon Bill knew from the sounds that the Shasta Six-Shooter had fallen into the hands of his foes.

He leaped to his feet, for the purpose of dashing to the Six-Shooter's aid, but changed his plan almost before it was formed.

His outstretched hand fell on the pole that held up the rear end of the tent. Throwing all his giant's strength into a sudden wrench, he tore the pole out of the ground and brought the tent down with a rush.

The struggling Six-Shooter and his assailants were caught in the collapsing folds and became entangled in the canvas and in the ropes that further fighting was out of the question.

It was each man for himself, to prevent being smothered.

Though astounded as any one, the detective's mind immediately cleared.

He knew that the downfall of the tent had been brought about by Babylon.

His first action was to draw his knife and slice a hole in the canvas that held him, and to crawl out through the hole.

The road-agents, still tangled in the ropes and folds of cloth, were making the air sulphurous, and, an alarm having spread, other road-agents were running that way.

"That you, pardner? Hyar I am!"

Babylon Bill caught the detective by the hand and drew him away.

CHAPTER XXIV.

BABYLON BILL'S PERIL.

They realized that their peril was very great. The camp was aroused, and the fires, shining everywhere, increased their difficulties.

The detective was in a very fever of dis-

appointment. He had not found the Ransoms, and further looking in that direction seemed now to be balked. So torn was his heart by reason of his great love for Miss Ruth that he could have cried aloud his despair.

The road-agents were freeing themselves from the wreckage of the tent, and no time was to be lost if our friends hoped to get away.

They ran straight down an avenue between two of the fires, and were seen.

Forthwith, pistols began to pop and balls to whistle, in a way that was very unpleasant and suggestive.

But neither was hit, though a rush of outlaws toward that section of the gorge forced them to deviate in their course.

Then outlaws appeared before them.

The Six-Shooter stopped, pantingly.

"I think we'd better try to get back to the place we entered. I'm lost, down this way!"

They started back, but they had not gone a dozen yards when both fell into a lava pit.

Out of this they scrambled, only to fall into another, a little farther on.

They were bruised, scratched and bleeding, and in anything but pleasant tempers.

From the sounds that reached them, they could tell that all the passes were being guarded, and that their opportunities of getting out were momentarily being lessened.

However, they hurried on, though they changed their tactics. Instead of seeking to get away by wild dashes, they resorted to silence and stealth.

"Bang!" rang out a rifle just in front.

The ball struck the Six-Shooter, and would have killed him but for the coat of mail. As it was, it hurled him half around and knocked him down.

The heavy padding under the steel armor saved him from serious injury, and he was instantly on his feet, striving with Babylon Bill to get away from the dangerous vicinity.

As he did so, he discovered that he and Babylon had stumbled into a sort of pocket, from which they could not escape except by fighting.

He was perfectly willing to fight, for his blood was up.

He could see that there were other road-agents back of the rifleman.

They were but shadowy and uncertain to the view, but he whipped out his revolvers, and began to fire at them in his lightning fashion.

"Make a rush for it!"

Babylon Bill made the rush, as directed, and the Shasta Six-Shooter, slowly following him, kept the rifleman from crowding too close on his heels.

Then a great hubbub sounded, and there arose cries which told him that Babylon Bill had fallen into the hands of the enemy.

At the same instant another rifle ball struck him in the breast, almost knocking him from his feet, but he maintained his ground, and coolly backed away, until he had turned an angle of rock, when he took to his heels, rightly considering that the better part of valor, under the circumstances.

As for Babylon Bill, he had run on at a rapid gait, harkening more to the sounds at the rear than to those in front, and plumped right into an ambush before he was aware of the new danger.

Hands clasped his legs and hurled him down, and a rope, thrown over his head with much skill, tightened about his throat and choked him into speedy submission.

Then he heard voices about him which revealed that his capture was the work of Chinese—of Chinese who acknowledged the leadership of Hop Sing, and were members of the road-agent band.

The yells from their Celestial throats brought Captain Hawk hurrying that way.

Hawk was disappointed when he discovered that the prisoner was Babylon, and not the Six-Shooter.

However, he had the Bald Hornet dragged to the nearest fire, where he demanded of the giant why he had come there.

Babylon Bill was the essence of coolness. Though he must have known that his dan-

ger was very great, he exhibited no evidence of fear.

"What did I come hyar fer? Well, now, reely, I don't know that it's any of your biz, but, jist to 'commodate you an' to keep you from eatin' ye'r heart out with curiosity, I'm willin' to admit that I come hyar a-huntin' fer my sweetheart, Miss Ruth Ransom."

The statement was met with a sneer on the part of Captain Hawk, and with a howl of derision on the part of the other outlaws who heard it.

Babylon Bill regarded them with kindling anger.

"Don't believe it, hey? Well, I don't know that they's any law what says you hef' to. All the same, it's the truth, the whole truth, an' nothin' but the truth. I perposed marriage to that young woman—"

"And that made her run away?"

"No, consarn ye! She felt honored! She didn't run away! She was stole by some swashbuckler that was jealous of me, an' she was brung hyar—leastways, I'm hyar a-huntin' fer her—"

The break was caused by a rattling revolver fire, that Babylon Bill, and the outlaws as well, knew came from the Shasta Six-Shooter.

It was aimed, too, at the group gathered about Babylon, or, to speak more correctly, at the camp-fire by which they stood.

The Six-Shooter, having evaded capture, did not intend to desert the man who had chanced the dangers of that visit to the outlaw camp.

He had turned back as soon as satisfied that he was not being successfully followed, and had approached the point where Babylon Bill was being held and questioned.

Much as he hated these men, it was not his desire to destroy human life. Therefore, in making a demonstration that he hoped would aid Babylon, he shot at the camp-fire instead of at the men.

The bullets struck the logs and tore splinters of fire from them, which were hurled through the air, and the leaden hail, pumped by those supple fingers, was so startling that the road-agents fairly tumbled over each other in their haste to get out of the camp-fire's light.

Wideawake Babylon Bill took instant advantage of the diversion.

He dashed back with the outlaws, then leaped by them, at Express train speed, and was lost in the shadows before they could recover from their surprise and panic and put forth hands to restrain him.

CHAPTER XXV.

IN THE MOUNTAIN'S HOT HEART.

As the outlaws were between him and Babylon Bill, the Six-Shot Spotter leaped away at equal speed in the opposite direction, hoping both could now get out of the place, and that they could join each other in the morning.

He was not yet sure that Ruth Ransom and her father were not held in the camp as prisoners—in truth, he still rather thought they were so held. He was resolved to make that point certain before trying to work back to Shasta.

His reflections were brought to a sudden and disagreeable suspension.

Running close by the lava hole that poured out its hot stream of water and threw out the fiery glare, his foot turned on a lava block.

With a cry of fear he pitched forward straight toward the hole, throwing out his hands to prevent the fall.

He succeeded in twisting to one side, so that he did not strike in the vapory stream, but beyond it.

But he could not regain his feet, and so tumbled and rolled, with many bruising jolts, down a slope that inclined downward like a stairway.

The fall carried him through the steamy vapor, which was so hot that it felt suffocating, and beyond the fiery glare, and, as he descended thus swiftly, he caught a momentary glimpse of a superheated cavity that looked for all the world like the heart of an iron furnace.

Then he was past it, with a shudder,

and tumbling farther downward, into what appeared to be unfathomable depths.

He stopped, with a jolt that left him dazed, and for a time incapable of thought or action.

As he roused himself, and felt of his bruised limbs to make sure no bones were broken, he observed that he was in a cavernous space that seemed to stretch backward into the heart of the mountain.

Above shone the glare, and the floating vapor from the hot water stream was shot through with an unearthly light, like mists from an inferno.

He dimly heard the bubbling and hissing of the water, but no sounds to indicate human presence.

Ordinarily the heat down there would have been an agreeable change from the keen and frosty air outside, but he had been running, and now he was perspiring like a dray horse on a hot day.

He lifted himself to his knees and beheld beyond him a shining passage lighted by a lamp at its farther end.

This indicated plainly that there was a cavern down there, occupied by the road-agents.

"An unpleasant sort of place in which to live or stay. Some of these days old Shasta will take it into its head to fill this hole up with red-hot lava, et cetera, and then, thank you, I'd rather be in some other neck of the woods!"

With this reflection he got stiffly on his feet.

For a moment he hesitated, considering whether he had better try to climb back to the place from which he had fallen, or descend along the shining passage.

Voices above decided him. Some one was advancing to the entrance.

With much wariness he crept along the rough gallery toward the lamp.

When he had gone twenty or thirty yards he was treated to another surprise.

The passage opened into a room of comfortable dimensions, which was reasonably well furnished. It had, at one side, a table, on which burned another lamp, and, seated at this table, fully revealed by the lamplight, was English Charley!

"That little jockey or his double, as I'm a living man!"

The voices he had heard at the entrance were heard again, and the detective, pressing close against the wall, found a niche into which he could squeeze his body.

He could still see English Charley, or the individual who looked like the jockey.

English Charley started up at that moment, and the detective thrilled with the fear of discovery, but, though the little man came toward him, he soon saw that his presence was unknown.

The jockey passed within two yards, and went on toward the entrance where the voices sounded, but the detective was still unable to say whether it was English Charley or one who resembled English Charley in a remarkable manner.

As soon as the little man had gone by the Shasta Six-Shooter got on his feet and crept softly into the cavern, and along toward another passage which the lights revealed as a dark hole.

He had hardly gained this and begun to breathe freely, when he saw English Charley return, accompanied by Captain Hawk.

They sat down together by the table and began to talk in an earnest way, and the Six-Shooter, irresistibly drawn by curiosity crept closer.

He had a hand on one of his revolvers and was resolved to make a big fight if discovered.

Only a few sentences were needed to tell him that Babylon Bill had not yet been retaken, Captain Hawk was growling and fuming because he thought Babylon Bill and the detective had both got safely out of the camp.

"He came here because he thought Ruth was here!"

The "he" referred to by Captain Hawk was the Six-Shooter himself, and the laugh that accompanied the statement showed how ridiculous Captain Hawk considered the idea which the detective had harbored.

Plainly, Ruth Ransom and her father were not held as prisoners in this lava camp!

The knowledge brought a sense of relief, though it really increased the detective's general distress. Where, then, was Ruth Ransom?

The mystery was thicker and blacker than ever.

Was this little man, who sat talking to Captain Hawk, Charles Berwick, to whom Ruth and her father had transferred all their property?

The detective looked at him closely, but the light in the cavern was not good, and he was too far to hear with sufficient distinctness to determine.

He hardly heard the little man say anything, though frequently Captain Hawk's loud words clearly reached him.

An outlaw descended with a message for Hawk, who left the place, accompanied by the jockey-like individual, and the detective found himself alone in the cavern.

He did not know what to do. He wanted to explore the cavern to its farthest depths, but when he reflected that daylight was coming, and that he ought to be out of the camp before its arrival, he cautiously followed the two toward the cavern's entrance.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A CLEVER GAME.

He saw Captain Hawk and the other leave the place, veiled in the vapor, and he, following close after, got out of the cavern in the same manner without discovery.

Hawk was walking toward the other end of the camp, and what few outlaws were in sight were looking toward Hawk, so that the Six-Shooter was able to leap backward, away from the fiery glow of the pit, and to shelter himself in the black spaces beyond.

Here he stood for some time, in much uncertainty. He wanted to join Babylon Bill.

However, there was nothing for it but to make his way out of the camp as best he could, and he slipped along in the darkness toward the entrance, which he and Babylon had so carefully studied from their high perch during the daylight hours.

As he approached this entrance he heard voices and saw the flash of a dark-lantern.

He discovered that half a dozen men were there who were preparing to leave the camp.

The light of the lantern showed that their faces were masked, and, when he had listened a little while he learned that they were armed and were setting out for the purpose of holding up the 'Frisco stage.

Hardly had he recovered from his surprise when a much greater surprise was thrust on him.

Babylon Bill was brought up by Captain Hawk and others.

The Six-Shooter had been so certain that Babylon had escaped that he was fairly bewildered by this new complication.

He learned that Babylon had been caught while trying to get away by the upper valley trail, and he learned, farther, that Captain Hawk proposed to take Babylon on this expedition.

There would probably be fighting when the stage was held up, and it was Hawk's intention to let Babylon be killed or captured in the fight.

The Six-Shooter saw his unfortunate pard draw himself up in his ridiculous way, and look down on the outlaws as if they were but miserable pigmies, and he a Colossus bestriding the world.

"Pardners, I don't mind bein' shot, but I do hate like tarnation to go with you and be killed in sich company! I'd a good deal sooner have gall and wormwood stirred into my mornin' bitters!"

"Will you shut up, or shall we put a gag on you?"

"I collapses, pardner! Shets up jist like any clam!"

A road-agent came up with a big mask, which was tied over the giant's face; then masks were adjusted to the faces of others there who had been without them, and all seemed in readiness to set out afoot for the holdup.

The Six-Shooter did not long hesitate.

"Maybe there'll be another fellow killed with a mask on!"

As they moved away through the gloom and out of the pass he softly tore from his coat a strip of black lining, which he hastily twisted into the semblance of a mask.

A sense of security came to him as he applied this to his face.

There was a guard in the pass, but he hurried by this guard with extraordinary boldness—a boldness which saved him from suspicion, and followed the outlaws, who had already gone through.

He could hear them talking, and, by quickening his pace, he soon came up with them.

They did not observe this addition to their ranks in the darkness, and went on, speaking of the prospective hold-up, and scolding, now and then, at Babylon Bill, whose awkwardness, actual or pretended, often angered them.

The distance to be passed over was considerable, and there were indications of the approach of day when the Shasta trail was gained.

Captain Hawk stepped behind a rock, struck a match, and looked at his watch.

"No time to lose!"

He was correct, for hardly were his men disposed on each side of the trail when the distant rumble of wheels was heard.

The detective kept close to Captain Hawk and Babylon Bill, who were on the same side, and was trying to think what he ought to do, when a suggestive recollection thrilled him to his finger tips.

Only the many things which had recently distressed him had made it possible for him to forget that armed stages were to be put on the Shasta trail, and that this was the first to make the run out of 'Frisco.

Shrewd as were the outlaws, they had evidently not learned of this.

Darkness and silence brooded in the defile, where the road-agents lay like wolves awaiting their prey.

With a clattering of hoofs and a rumble and roar, the stage swung down the trail.

Two disguised men leaped into the middle of the narrow path, with leveled rifles, and sang out for the stage to halt, an order which the driver hastened to obey.

Then the outlaws swarmed out from behind the rocks, and, at the same time, in apparent obedience to the command to tumble out and hold up their hands, a number of men leaped out of the stage.

But they did not hold up their hands! Instead, they threw them up, with drawn weapons in them, and began to shoot in a way to make the bravest road-agent dizzy with astonishment.

In the same instant the Shasta Six-Shooter leaped like a mountain lion on the back of Captain Hawk, bore him to the earth, and snapped handcuffs on his wrists.

The rout of the road-agents was complete. Three of them went down under that first fire. Then the others, with the exception of Captain Hawk, fled wildly.

The only living ones left of those who had come from the lava camp were Captain Hawk, Babylon Bill and the Six-Shooter.

CHAPTER XXVII.

BACK TO THE LAVA BEDS.

The wild, fierce rage of Captain Hawk, when he realized that he was in the toils, was something terrible to witness.

Nor was this rage lessened when he discovered that the Shasta Six-Shooter had come, with a mask on his face, from the lava camp, with the masked band.

Two of the dead outlaws were recognized as men well known in Shasta.

A Chinaman, who had been wounded, was captured, some distance down the slope.

The exultation of the officers who had so completely turned the tables on the road-agents, was as great as was Captain Hawk's rage.

But Hawk soon quieted down, realizing that his fury was useless.

"Every dog has his day," he said, as the detective came near him. "It's your turn now, but the game ain't played out!"

There were such bitter menace in the words, and such malevolence that the Six-Shooter fairly shuddered as he turned away.

The detective's plans were quickly taken. He was known by the men who had come down from 'Frisco, and they deferred to him; in truth, they had been sent because of his appeals for assistance.

It was decided that Captain Hawk and the dead and wounded road-agents should be sent on to Shasta in the stage, with only a guard and the driver, and that the other officers should be led by the detective and Babylon Bill straight to the lava camp.

It was hoped and believed that the lava camp might be surprised and captured without a great struggle.

The outlaws who had been defeated and scattered had apparently fled in all directions for their very lives, and it was, therefore, a question if any of them had made their way back to the camp.

"They'll go there sooner or later, though! But if we move now, at a forced march, I think it likely we can get there ahead of any of them."

It was decided in accordance with the plans and wishes of the Six-Shot Spotter.

Then Captain Hawk and the wounded Chinaman were tightly bound and tumbled into the stage, the bodies of the dead outlaws were put in beside them, a guard, armed with a Winchester and belted about with revolvers, took his seat at the driver's side, and the stage rolled on toward Shasta with its dead and living freight.

As soon as it was out of sight around the first bend, the Six-Shooter led his party across the slope, and bore directly away toward the lava camp at a rapid pace.

The darkness still held, and it was hoped to reach and capture the camp before sunrise.

When the valley below the gorge was gained there was a halt, and these instructions were given:

"I want to capture that little fellow who looks like English Charley! Then we can learn whether he is English Charley or not. If there are two of them, I want to set them face to face and find out which is English Charley and which is the other fellow. I must have him. Don't let him get away!"

The advance was recommenced, and, when another half-mile had been passed over, the Six-Shooter called a halt and slipped forward alone.

Just before him, as he knew, was the pass which had been guarded by the sentinel. If an alarm had not been carried to the camp and it, in consequence, deserted, he would find the sentinel still there.

As he drew nearer the point he got down on his hands and knees.

He crept forward to the spot the sentinel had occupied, and felt a pang of disappointment as he saw the man was not standing there.

But when he advanced a little farther he found that the post had not been abandoned. The sentry was walking a beat, and now, turning about, came straight toward him.

A little feeling of nervousness came to the detective, when he discovered that, if there were no change of course, the sentinel would walk right over the spot where he lay.

It was now impossible to move either backward or forward without detection. The black shadows had largely sped away. The eastern sky was getting still lighter, and day was at hand.

Seeing there was nothing else to do, he clung closer to the earth, and watched the sentry's advance with the wariness of a crouching wolf.

The sentry came on, all unaware of the foe that lay before him. If he saw the object, he simply thought it a blacker shadow or a rock.

He was not undeceived until he was fairly over the detective. Another step would have caused him to strike a foot against the detective's head.

Then the seeming shadow reached up sinewy, muscular arms, and, with a quick motion, pulled the sentry from his feet.

The sentry came down with a low cry, letting his rifle drop from his hand.

The surprise and the suddenness of the attack deprived him of his powers of resistance, and, before he was fairly aware of what had befallen him, he was flat on

his back, with fingers clutching his throat and a heavy knee pressing in his chest.

The Six-Shooter gave the low whistle agreed on as a signal, and two of his men hurried to his assistance.

"Put those ropes on him, and that handkerchief in his mouth! Quick!"

The sentinel's hands and feet were seized and the already prepared gag was lifted to his face.

Thinking his moments were numbered he gave vent to a yell.

But he let out no more, for one of the men struck him on the head with the butt of a pistol, and effectively silenced him.

But the mischief had been done, the yell had been heard, and the surprise given the camp was only partial.

Several of the outlaws got together, with weapons in their hands, and tried to make a stand in the lower, narrower part of the gorge.

But their resistance was only temporary. The detective led the charge against them with those terrible six-shooters, and the outlaws were driven back.

At his side ran Babylon Bill, as the charge was made, giving vent to yells that were terrifying enough to scare every road-agent out of the mountain.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A TRICK WORTHY OF FIENDS.

There was no resistance as the rush was made into the camp. Apparently, the outlaws had precipitately fled.

A shot from the vicinity of the lava hole, into which the detective had previously fallen, showed that this was not so.

Other shots rattled from the same place, and it seemed the road-agents had retreated to the depths of the cavern.

The cavern was of unknown size, and the chances of driving them out of it did not seem the best.

The fiery glow from the pit, together with the light from the smoldering camp-fires, added to the increasing daylight, enabled the officers to see a few forms that were skurrying among the rocks beyond the lava hole.

An attempt was made to cut off and capture these, but it failed. The outlaws, more familiar with that portion of the mountain, slipped out by ways unknown to the pursuers.

The Six-Shooter stopped, not far from the mouth of the lava pit, and called out, after a moment's indecision:

"Who will follow me in there? It may mean death. I shan't order any man! I want volunteers."

Babylon Bill cast his disreputable hat on the ground.

"Hyar's the Bald Hornet from Brimstone Bar, wi' his stinger ready fer business!"

The others were as courageous as the Bald Hornet. They stepped forward to a man.

The detective smiled his pleasure.

"I felt sure I could depend on you! Follow me, now. We'll make a dash of it!"

With drawn revolvers, they crowded in close behind him, and then a simultaneous rush was made for the aperture, which was visible.

The detective more than half expected a volley, which would bring death to some of them. His courage in making this rush was really not as great, though, as that of Babylon Bill, who leaped along at his side, for Babylon had no armor of steel to shield him from the deadly bullets.

Instead of leaden hail, they were greeted with a singular silence. There was not a shot or a sound in answer to their rush, nor did they hear the pattering feet of any persons who might be running away.

The detective halted, puzzled and uneasy, but almost immediately pushed on, determined to learn the meaning of this.

The cave was seemingly deserted. The corridor, that had before so shown by reason of the lamp light, was black and invisible. Only where they stood did the glare from the lava fissure illuminate the honey-combed walls.

"I don't like the looks of this. Some of you had better go back to see if we are not trapped."

Hardly had the words issued from the

detective's lips, when a great crash was heard at the entrance and hot water flew about them in a showery spray.

Instantly they found themselves in darkness.

A terrifying idea of what had been done came to the men. The Six-Shooter tried to maintain his coolness. He stepped farther down the incline, and, drawing out a match, struck it and held it up.

The match burned out all too quickly, but it gave sufficient light to show them that the opening at the side of the lava fissure through which they had descended was blocked.

A big stone had been rolled into it, shutting it as tight as if it were a door.

More than this, the stone blocked in the water, just as it blocked out the sunlight. The passage was filled with a hot, disagreeable vapor, and the steam, kept from its outlet, was pouring its diminutive flood into the cavern.

Fortunately, this water did not run straight down the tunnel where they stood, but dropped into a fissure that ran at its side.

"We must find some way out of here. There were lamps back in that room. We can't work without lights."

A feeling of panic was seizing the men, as the Shasta Six-Shooter could tell.

Some action must be taken to avert this, as well as to bring about their escape.

"Stay here till I bring a light."

His familiarity with the way greatly aided him. He hurried into the apartment that had been occupied by the man who resembled English Charley, and there after some search and stumbling about, he put his hands on the table that held one of the lamps.

He lighted it without delay and looked about him.

The cavern was certainly deserted, and he leaped to the quick and disturbing conclusion that the only way out if it had been blocked.

If this were true, the trap into which he and his men had rushed was of the most horrible character. The hot water from the diverted stream would fill the cavern after a while, and they would be literally cooked to death, if they did not shoot each other or commit suicide to escape the terrible fate.

The detective's strong nerves trembled as the hellishness of the fate to which the outlaws had doomed him dawned on his mind.

Apparently the first thing to be done was to discover if the stone dropped into the entrance could be pushed back.

He took up the lamp and hurried toward his men with it, resolved to put on as bold a front as he could, and to keep them from knowing how great were his fears.

But they had been talking during his absence and had arrived at the same conclusions.

"That there water's so hot it would bile a fish in less than five minutes," Babylon Bill announced, in a tone which seemed to indicate he had made a joyful discovery.

"Well?"

"I'm not preachin' any sermons, I'm jist statin' facts. The fires must be purty hot down there where it comes from, I tell ye."

The Six-Shooter pushed by him with the lamp.

"We may be able to shove back that rock. Let's try it."

They followed him eagerly.

"All together, now! Heave on it, my hearties!"

The men strained every nerve, realizing that they were working to save themselves from a horrible death. But they could not move the stone. Nothing less than a blast of dynamite could have lifted it out of its position.

The hot water was dashing and splashing by them in a very suggestive way and flinging scalding drops over them now and then, and the hot vapor wet them and made them feel as if they were already being scalded.

They could not stand it, and as soon as they were sure that further efforts in that line were useless, they beat a retreat and descended into the large apartment.

They found no refuge there. The water from the stream was spreading over the cavern's floor. But for the fact that it was draining out through a number of channels, they saw that it must speedily mount about them and end their struggles.

"We've got to find a way out. There must be one. We'll find it."

The words of the detective were inspiring, and the men set to work to explore the passages they saw, hoping almost against hope that one or more might lead them out of the awful place.

But every avenue and passage followed came to an end, sooner or later.

A despairing group it was that gathered in the chamber, when the last of the avenues had been unsuccessfully explored. The water covered the floor and was constantly mounting. A moist stream, that was hot and irritating, and almost rendered ineffective the light of the lamp, filled the place.

The outlook seemed absolutely hopeless.

They had been drawn blindly into a trap from which there was no escape.

The Six-Shooter looked at his dumb followers. His own face was ghastly, seen through the foggy atmosphere and under the lamp's unnatural light.

"I blame myself for leading you here. But I am to suffer the penalty with you, if there is to be a penalty. Something may come to our aid yet. While there's life there's hope."

The words were but empty sounds; they brought no cheer. It required no elaborate calculations to determine how long it would be before the water would mount to the top of the cavern walls.

The place was already so hot that it was almost unbearable.

To get out of the way of the water, the men climbed up the broken walls as high as they could get.

There they perched, the despair in their faces shown by the lamp to which the detective still clung.

It was soon apparent that the avenues and holes into which the water had been draining were filled. The gurgling sounds ceased, and then the water crept up the walls with alarming speed.

Inch by inch and foot by foot it ascended. The men could climb no higher, and it seemed they must soon be cooked to death or terminate their existence in another way.

But the hope to which the detective had sought to fix them again arose.

Another gurgling sound was heard. The mounting water had found another opening.

The Six-Shooter worked around to the point where the stream was draining out and examined it.

He held up the light and peered into the hole through the fog.

His shout electrified his companions.

"Pards! I believe these stones can be moved! Let's make a try of it. There's room here on which we can stand!"

Babylon Bill, who had been markedly mute for some time, lifted his voice in a ringing "Hooroar!"

It was echoed by the others, and, with much confusion, they crowded along the slippery ledges to the point where the detective knelt with the lamp.

The stream did not seem to be dropping into another cavern, but draining away. It ran out swiftly, and the water, almost ceased to ascend in the cavern.

By uniting their strength a stone that hung just above the aperture was pulled down and dropped into the cavern.

Through the enlarged space the detective crept, scalding his hands and feet more than once, but plucky and resolute.

He found himself in an avenue high enough to stand up in and with footing at the sides.

His shout of triumph brought his companions scrambling at his heels.

He went cautiously on, holding the lamp above his head and peering through the thick mists that so obscured everything, and the others followed, with a constantly growing hope.

The avenue soon pitched downward at a little angle, then ran on for a distance on a level, and pitched downward again.

"We will make it yet, boys!"

His vibrant words rang out in a way to thrill them to the heart.

The words were a prophecy. He stopped, put the lamp behind him, and peered ahead. There was a pale, gray light visible through the vapor.

He could not repress the shout of triumph that leaped to his lips.

The shout was echoed by Babylon Bill in a roar that seemed to shake the very walls.

A frantic dash was made for the opening, and, less than five minutes later, they found themselves standing on the lava slopes beyond the valley in which they had attacked the outlaws.

It was broad day, and the sun was shining down on them in a way to cheer their very souls.

CHAPTER XXIX.

HAWK BEHIND BARRED DOORS.

When the coach carrying Captain Hawk and his wounded and dead associates rolled into Shasta, and the news of the road-agent repulse spread through the camp, the greatest excitement prevailed.

The majority of the people of the camp were overjoyed at Captain Hawk's downfall, but there were others who received the news in quite a different spirit.

Among the latter was Hop Sing, the wily Celestial.

Hop Sing had not been driven out of Shasta, because it was thought best that he should be left undisturbed for a time. As he was known to be identified with the road-agents it had been hoped by the Six-Shooter that a watch on his movements might reveal something of importance.

Hop Sing hovered on the edge of the crowd that gathered about the stage, and listened, with strained ears, to all he heard.

There was much anger manifested, and for a time it seemed that a mob would be formed to take Captain Hawk away from the officers and lynch him.

But better counsel prevailed.

As for the redoubtable captain himself, he stood, with bound hands, before the men who howled for his blood, and neither asked for pardon nor begged for his life.

The wounded Chinaman was bundled out and stood up by his side.

Hop Sing's eyes glittered as he beheld his countryman thus in the toils, and his breath came quick when he heard words from the crowd that were calculated to turn the vengeance of the baser elements again toward himself.

His crafty eyes grew even brighter, though, when he learned that the road-agent chief was to be taken to the jail, and that the Chinaman was to be taken to a private establishment where his injuries could be treated by a physician.

Hop Sing fell back as the crowd opened and the two men appeared, and he cast down his crafty eyes lest their excited glistening should betray his feelings.

The bodies of the dead road-agents were exposed to view in a public place, where all might behold the men of Shasta who had thus proven themselves lawless villains.

Hop Sing saw the captain of the band conveyed to the jail, then he hurried back to his laundry and busied himself with the shirts and clothing there collected.

All through the day his iron moved to and fro on the white surfaces, and his busy brain schemed for the release of the prisoners.

Into his thoughts, helping to mold them, was interjected the news of the return of the party commanded by the Shasta Six-Shooter.

It was past noon before this party reached Shasta.

On getting out of the cavern the officers had not been able to find further traces of the road-agents, though they had gone back into the valley for the purpose. They had discovered some trails, which had played out on the lava slopes, but not a road-agent, living or dead.

Consequently they brought back with them nothing to show they had been near the road-agent camp, for even the captured guard had escaped during their confinement in the cavern.

Hop Sing was again out in the streets, flitting from point to point, and, if the eyes of those set to watch his movements had not been diverted by other interests, they must have observed that he visited laundries and places of business and abode, where he held surreptitious and whispered consultation with other Chinese.

It had already been arranged that Captain Hawk should be taken to 'Frisco and there arraigned for his many crimes. The 'Frisco authorities wanted him on more than a dozen charges, not the least of which was murder.

As soon as he could get away from the throngs that troubled him and impeded his actions, the Shasta Six-Shooter hurried to the rustic cabin that had so recently sheltered the woman he had learned to love with a deep and lasting love.

To know what had become of her was to him a greater consideration even than the capture of the band he had been sent to destroy.

He wanted, also, to see if the English jockey were there. The mystery concerning the little man sorely troubled him.

English Charley was not there, the house was deserted, and the Six-Shooter returned to the camp.

When he had satisfied his ravenous hunger he caught a few winks of sleep, for he was dead tired, and then he sallied out again, going this time to the jail that held Captain Hawk.

As he was well known to the guard, he was shown without question into the little room occupied by the road-agent chief.

Hawk looked up, and caught the detective's eye with a smile of hate and defiance.

"It is like you to come here and taunt me with my helplessness!"

"You are mistaken, Captain Hawk! I came here for another purpose. I'm thinking you can give me some information."

"You'll choke it out of me, then?"

The Shasta detective stood with his back against the door and a hand ready for a weapon. He did not propose to be caught napping.

Hawk smiled again in his evil way when he observed the precautions, and saw, too, that the guard was in the corridor ready to give aid to the Six-Shooter.

"You're a very brave man, my 'Frisco (I should say frisky) detective! You fight best when you've got the drop on a fellow!"

"Even now, with all the chances with you, you come here wearing that coat of mail—my coat of mail!"

"I don't see that that's either here or there! I came to talk business. Perhaps you'll change your manner, when I tell you that we captured the little lackey, English Charley!"

He was watching the prisoner narrowly, and smiled when he saw Hawk give a start.

"It's a lie!"

Hawk recovered on the instant.

"Your words prove you to be a gentleman, captain! You don't think we captured him?"

"I know you didn't, for the little Englishman was never with us!"

"Then we captured his double! We've got a man that looks for all the world like him!"

Hawk maintained an imperturbable countenance.

"What have you got to say to that?"

"Nothing."

"And you don't care to know whether we took any others or not?"

"I'm not afraid but that you'll tell me if you did. You couldn't keep such news away from me!"

Hawk was as keen-eyed as the bird whose name he had assumed, and the detective felt those flashing eyes reading him through and through.

"I know you've done nothing of the kind. If you had, you'd have come at me in quite a different way. As I said at first, you're a liar!"

"Thank you! You're a gentleman! Good afternoon!"

The Six-Shooter found it difficult to control his rage under such provocation, and

backed out of the room, seeing that he was really accomplishing nothing.

He had not deceived Hawk in the least.

From the jail he went out into the town, and for several hours was busy with the Shasta officials and the officers who had come down from 'Frisco, determining on a course of action concerning Hawk and the other outlaws, whom, though not yet taken, they hoped to take.

Darkness had fallen when he again appeared on the streets and took his way toward the cottage of the Ransoms.

He was fairly bewildered when he approached it and saw a light shining in a window. He had not really thought any one would be there.

His bewilderment was not decreased when, in answer to his knock, English Charley opened the door and invited him in.

The detective maintained his coolness and walked into the cottage.

"You haven't heard anything from Miss Ruth that you care to tell me, since I saw you last?" as he dropped into a chair.

"Not a thing."

"See here! I haven't much time to waste, and I want to ask you a few serious questions."

English Charley smiled, dropped into another chair, and folded his arms.

"I'm ready for the inquisition. Go ahead."

"I saw you in the cavern up on Shasta!"

English Charley lifted up his eyebrows.

"Oh, you did? Then you saw a good deal more than I saw! What was I doing up there, pray? Quite a step from here, isn't it?"

"You were talking to Captain Hawk, at one time!"

"Oh, I was," with another uplifting of the brows.

The detective with difficulty restrained his temper. The jockey's smiling and unruffled manner disturbed him. He had an inner feeling that he was being laughed at.

"Do you mean to say it wasn't you I saw up there?"

"I don't mean to say anything. It's you who are making statements."

The detective was more than ever puzzled. At one moment convinced it was English Charley he had seen in the camp, the next moment he felt sure it must have been English Charley's double.

There were some other things, too, that disturbed him and caused him to look with greater keenness than ever at the little Englishman.

Determined to get at something like the truth, he remained resolutely in the chair and continued to ply his unwelcome questions.

The talk drifted to many things—to the coming of the Six-Shooter to that point, his ride down the flume, his adventures with the road-agents.

Surely there was plenty to talk about, and he talked so well that the time went by more rapidly than either thought.

Still he learned nothing.

Finally the conversation was brought to an abrupt termination by a loud outcry in the direction of the jail, and both rushed out of the cottage and down the narrow path toward the jail and the town.

Perhaps English Charley had tried to detain the detective at the cottage. If so, he had accomplished his purpose full well!

CHAPTER XXX.

THE CUTENESS OF HOP SING.

As night drew on Hop Sing approached the cook of the Old Home Restaurant, from whom the guards and prisoners of the jail received their meals.

"That last washee not good, eh?" with a quick glance around. "Me wantee lilly talkee with you. Lilly money talkee!"

He and the cook were well acquainted, and something in his tones struck on the cook's quick ear.

The cook also looked carefully around, to make sure they were not observed, then he drew Hop Sing into a back room.

"I can see that you're up to something, Hop. What is it?"

"Boutee them plisoners!" Hop whispered. "Boutee them load-agents!"

"Oh! Well, what is it?"

Hop Sing reached into a hidden pocket and drew therefrom a well-filled bag of gold dust. He opened the mouth of the bag, that the cook might see the stuff was genuine.

The cook turned down the light.

"Little reckless about that, ain't ye?"

"Thatee fol you!" Hop whispered. "You puttee othel stuff in the pan!"

He began to speak rapidly, and quickly outlined a plan that he had elaborated.

From another pocket he took a package of whitish powder, which he placed beside the gold dust on the small table. A quantity of this powder he wanted the cook to mix in the food to be served that night to the jail guards.

The cook picked up the bag of gold dust.

"You bet! I'd poison my granny fer that! Not a poison, though, you say? Jist to make 'em sleep?"

He opened the bag of gold and looked into it with greedy eyes.

"To-morrow this shebang'll be huntin' another cook! I might burn my fingers ten years hyar, an' I wouldn't save up that much of the yaller stuff."

As soon as the arrangements were completed to his satisfaction Hop Sing slipped out of the house and away into the darkness.

Shortly thereafter he and other Celestials stationed themselves in the shadows about the jail. They carried bundles, which they handled carefully and crouched low whenever any one drew near.

As the darkness deepened, Hop Sing gave his bundle into the hands of a fellow-Celestial and stole away to get closer to the jail.

Lying flat on his face, with his almond eyes searching the paths, he saw the food brought from the restaurant and carried up to the guards and the prisoners.

He would not let himself worry, though he knew how possible it was that the cook might have made a mistake and sent the drugged food to the prisoners instead of to the guards.

But he could do nothing but wait the turn of events.

Some time afterward he saw the trays borne away, and observed the prison settling down to the quiet of the night.

There were not many jail guards, as Hop saw, and he was more than half convinced that this paucity was part of a plan to welcome a mob to lay bloody hands on Captain Hawk.

When everything was quiet Hop crept out to where his fellow-Chinamen were awaiting him, whispered a few words, and then softly crept again toward the jail.

A faint smile illumined his yellow face as he looked back and saw his subordinates moving like shadows through the yard, stooping constantly, and moving their hands as if they were placing something on the ground.

This was, indeed, what they were doing. The bundles they had carried had been carefully prepared slips of canvas and paper, smeared with a sticky substance more tenacious than any bird lime ever set for the foot of an unwary warbler. In many respects the stuff resembled the sticky fly paper now in such common use, though the gluey paste was ten times stickier than any fly paper.

All over the grounds just outside the jail, the Chinese placed the sticky paper and canvas, leaving only one narrow path.

They worked with marvelous silence and speed, and, when their work was well done, they drew back into the shadows and watched and waited.

All but Hop Sing. He mounted the steps of the jail, ready now to perform his part.

The success of his plans depended on how thoroughly the drugged food had done its work.

The drug, as he soon discovered, had not failed him.

The guard who sat near the door, and whose watchfulness he had most feared, was sound asleep, with head drooped on breast and rifle against the wall.

Hop touched him on the knee to make sure he slept, then crept on, highly elated.

The second guard slept, in the same way, and on a nail, just above his head, hung the jail and the cell keys.

These Hop took down, and now, convinced that he really had nothing to fear, he walked straight to the cell which he had previously ascertained to be the one occupied by Captain Hawk.

In front of the captain's cell door he stopped, selected a key from the bunch and applied it to the lock.

The place was quite dark.

"Who is that?" Hawk whispered.

"Hop! He come lettee you out!"

The answer was also whispered, and then another key was applied, the first having failed to do the work.

Finally a key was found that fitted the lock, and the cell door swung open, letting Captain Hawk into the corridor.

He caught Hop Sing by the hand.

"You're a chap to tie to, Hop! This is a thing I'll never forget!"

"No time! Gottee git out!"

"Very true! But I hadn't thought you'd run such risks! What about the guards?"

"Gualds all sleepee samee like sticks. Gottee no sense now."

Light dawned on the mind of the road-agent chief.

"Heave on, then! You can't go too fast for me!"

But Hop Sing, in making this statement, reckoned without his host. He believed all the guards had been drugged and were now unconscious, and was acting in accordance with this belief, forgetful of his usual caution.

But one of the guards had not eaten of the drugged food. Not because he had suspected danger, but simply because he had not been hungry.

He was at his post, in the farther end of the long corridor, and now he heard Hop Sing and the road-agent talking.

He knew at once that something was wrong.

Without a moment's hesitation he caught up his rifle and hurried in the direction of the sounds.

Hop and Captain Hawk heard his approaching footsteps. Almost a panic seized the Chinaman, who had an instant before been so bold and confident.

But Captain Hawk's nerve did not desert him.

"Make a break for it! The way is clear in front of us! We can't stop to fight him!"

He darted forward as he said the words, and the Chinaman sped along at his side.

The patter of their feet made the corridor and the jail resound.

The guard knew prisoners were escaping, and pitched his rifle to his face and fired.

The ball screamed within an inch of Hop Sing's head and flattened against the wall at the corridor's end. It did no harm, though, and before the guard could fire again they were out of the jail on the steps.

Here Hop Sing caught the captain by the hand and directed him.

Both saw they had no time to lose. A number of men who had been standing talking not a block from the jail tumbled wildly in that direction.

Hop Sing hung to Hawk's hand and led him by way of the path left by the Chinese, and so got him away from the prison without coming in contact with the stuff strewn so liberally over the grounds.

The guard was not so lucky. He had no more than stepped off the steps when he found, clinging to his feet, what seemed large sheets of paper.

These increased at each step, until his feet were clogged, and when he stooped down, with an oath, to tear the things away, they clung to his hands and sleeves.

He dropped his gun and began to claw wildly at the stuff, whose mysterious character he could not understand, and the more he clawed the worse it was for him.

His clothing was speedily covered, his hands and arms, his feet and legs, became rolls of the sticky stuff, from which, by no possibility could he free himself.

All thought of pursuit was out of the question. He was rendered absolutely helpless.

The yell that he gave out when he began to see that he could not escape, was enough to wake the dead.

It was responded to by men who had

been aroused by the shot and who were already bounding in his direction.

But no sooner did they approach the jail than they found themselves in the same predicament.

Their curses and groans and exclamations were frightful to hear, even though they partook of the ludicrous.

One or two of them fell down when their shoes balled up with the paper and canvas, and these were in a worse fix than any of the rest.

There seemed for them absolutely no help, except such as might come from others besides themselves.

"Hooroar!" yelled Babylon Bill, who, drawn also by the shot, drew near, now, at a dead run.

One of the men pulled himself up in desperation and howled out a warning to the giant.

"Great snakes! What is it?"

Babylon heard and tried to heed the warning, but already he had put a foot on one of the sticky things.

"Get back! Get back!" was yelled at him.

"Feels like I'd set this old boot into a porous plaster! What in tarnation is the trouble, an' what air ye all a-yawlin' 'bout?"

They tried to tell, all the while warning him to keep away.

Babylon Bill drew back and succeeded in getting the plaster from his boot, though he stuck-up his hands pretty much in the effort, and got some of the paste on his coat and in his hair before he succeeded.

Other men streamed out from the camp, and now lanterns were procured and an effort made to learn just what the trouble was.

The sight these men beheld was most wonderful and ridiculous.

More than a dozen men had ventured near the jail, and were now masses of paper and cloth, which seemed to be held together by a white paint-like substance that was stickier than any glue ever encountered.

And the road-agent chief?

He and Hop Sing were gone from the place, with all the Chinese who had aided in this clever jail delivery.

CHAPTER XXXI.

A STUCK-UP CAMP.

Babylon Bill gave out another roar.

One of the unfortunates, in trying to free himself from the stuff that bewildered and bothered him, stumbled full against the giant.

Two or three sheets of the paste remained glued to the latter's breast.

"Take it off!" he howled. "Take it off!"

His eyes grew big with fear, and it could clearly be seen that his superstitions were aroused, and that he was inclined to think the stuff clinging thus to him was of evil origin.

His howl was echoed by Mrs. McCulish.

Mrs. McCulish had hurried from her boarding-house at breakneck speed, drawn by a report that Babylon Bill had got into trouble and was being murdered.

Now, when she saw him reeling to and fro, fighting at the substance that so distressed and frightened him, she thought he was about to drop from a wound received.

Therefore she rushed up to him with a shriek, and threw her arms about him to sustain him.

The result was laughable in the extreme. She found herself glued to the giant in a mysterious and comical way.

The giant stopped his prancing and looked down on her with a humorous smile. A twinkle of fun came into his eyes.

"I say, widder, is this hyar what you call bein' j'ined together in the holy bonds o' wedlock? If it is, 'scuse me!"

She was so shocked by his sacrilegious comment that she threw herself backward with a cry of disgust, and tore herself free.

"I feel powerful stuck-up, Mrs. McCulish. But hanged if I'm at all big-feelin'd. I'll love you harder than a mule can kick of you'll git this stuff off'n me."

The excitement occasioned by the dis-

covery that the jail had been opened and Hawk released, with the tangle in which the people had floundered, occasioned so much talk and confusion that the flushing Mrs. McCulish gratefully saw that the little episode which had bound her to the man of her love had not been generally observed.

"Let us do be gittin' away from this!" she urged. "The both av us need a little hot wather, I'm thinkin'! If you'll come wi'd me to the house?"

The High Roller was really glad to accede to the request.

But even hot water, backed by liberal applications of soap, was hardly sufficient to remove the sticky stuff from their clothing.

"Such another stuck-up camp as this hyar is," Babylon Bill cried, as he again went into the streets.

Hardly had he turned the corner when he was greeted by a roar of jovial laughter.

He stopped and surveyed, with a frown, the crowd that had gathered.

"A bumble bee wallerin' in honey warn't a patchin' to the Bald Hornet a-wallerin' in that there truck. And, then, when the widder come a-runnin'—"

Babylon Bill turned on them with fierce demeanor.

"You don't want me to pull this hyar six-chambered stinger out o' my belt and jab its p'izen into some o' you, now, I reckon?"

"Oh, wipe ye'r eye!" scoffingly called a youth, whose rough life had not taught him to reverence those older than himself. "I say, fellers, when that widder hugged him, an'—"

Babylon Bill turned from his other tormentors with a bellow of anger, and put down a hand to get a pistol out of his belt.

Instantly a cowboy pard of the reckless youth, who chanced to be standing near, seeing that his pard's life was likely to be put in peril, threw out a lariat, with a deft jerk.

The lariat, which was but little larger than a big cord, caught Babylon Bill's arms and yanked him backward, causing him to let out a yell that might have been heard a mile.

"I'll have ye'r heart's blood fer that!"

The High Roller quickly recovered his equilibrium and cast off the lariat, which he did by drawing out a knife and slashing the lariat in two.

His blood was up, and the rash youth and his equally rash partner would probably have paid severely for their foolhardy prank, but for the cry that now arose, coming from a body of men marching up the street:

"Down with the Chinese!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

A SLIPPERY HEATHEN CHINEE.

There was an instant rush, which left Babylon Bill alone, storming at the air.

He pulled himself together, got the better of his rage, and began to realize that he had made a fool of himself, as he usually did when he let his anger outrun his sense.

The cry against the Chinese had been occasioned by the report of the guard who had not been drugged.

This guard, as soon as the sticky plaster could be got off his person and clothing so that he could relate what had occurred, told how he had seen a Chinaman running from the jail with the escaping prisoner.

The story spread with wonderful rapidity, and a mob speedily formed for the purpose of visiting the laundries and dragging out the Celestials for hanging.

It was never hard to raise such a mob in the camp of Shasta, where the Chinese were much hated.

Babylon Bill followed this mob, as it passed on toward the laundry of Hop Sing.

He doubted if Hop Sing was there, for, as soon as he heard the account given by the guard, he set Hop Sing down as the Chinaman the guard had seen.

But when the crowd stopped in front of the laundry and the door was pushed open, Hop Sing was seen seated in a chair, smoking a cigarette, and grinning as of yore.

No other Chinese were visible.

Hop Sing got out of his chair, still grin-

ning, and in his best English welcomed the crowd, and asked what was wanted.

For reply he was jerked roughly from his feet.

As he fell, his foot struck a bell beneath the counter that had not been before noticed, and this bell gave forth a tinkling that was very suggestive.

In the opinion of Babylon Bill, the striking of the bell was no mere accident. He believed it connected with the underground apartment.

At that instant the Shasta Six-Shooter pushed into the room and touched Babylon Bill inquiringly on the shoulder.

But words were not needed to acquaint him with what was occurring.

To pacify the mob, that seemed on the point of tearing the Chinaman to pieces, the Shasta Six-Shooter stepped forward and told of the rooms back of the laundry.

Instantly the door was pushed open, and the little concealed door back of that, and the rooms were thoroughly searched.

There was every evidence of sudden flight. A table, around which some men had evidently been sitting, had been overturned and still lay on its side, but no one could be found.

There seemed no doubt that the Chinese had been in the rooms at the moment of the invasion of the laundry and had been warned by the bell.

But they had vanished as completely as if the earth had swallowed them.

For fifteen minutes or more the men searched the rooms; then the Shasta Six-Shooter uttered a little cry.

What had seemed solid boards had yielded under his feet, and an opening was revealed.

This led into an underground avenue, which opened into a cellar some distance away.

But the Chinese were gone.

When the detective got back to the laundry, he found Hop Sing sitting on the table with handcuffs on his wrists. There was a peculiar glitter in the almond eyes, but otherwise Hop Sing was as smiling and apparently as unconcerned as ever.

However, his glance roved to and fro like that of a trapped rat, as the men streamed again into the room.

Then there went up a cry of "Hang him!"

He was seized and pushed through the door into the street.

He looked up and down it, and blinked under the rays of the light above his head, but he seemed not in the least dismayed.

The crowd followed close on his heels and men were hurrying off in search of ropes.

All this was taken in at a glance by the almond eyes, and then, quick as a flash, Hop Sing slipped his slender hands out of the handcuffs, overthrew a man that stood between him and liberty, and was off like a shot.

The whole thing was done in a twinkling, and done so cleverly that the bloodthirsty crowd was taken altogether by surprise.

The officer who had applied the handcuffs had not observed the smallness of Hop Sing's hands—had not thought of an attempt at escape being made in that manner.

A dozen cries of "Halt" rang out; more than a dozen hands went up, and pistol balls whistled down the street after the fleeing Chinaman; but Hop Sing, undismayed and untouched, turned the first corner, dived into the nearest alley, and ran like a deer for the slopes of the mountain.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE THEFT OF THE DIAMOND CROWN.

Altogether, it had been a bad night for the Six-Shooter and the officers who hoped to break up the road-agent band. Captain Hawk was gone, Hop Sing was gone, and so, likewise, were their Chinese accomplices.

But the detective did not linger long over these things with regret. He set to work to undo the mischief, in so far as in him lay.

Thus three days went by. Then he got a letter from a brother detective in San

Francisco, which drove the road-agents quite out of his mind for a time.

The letter stated that the 'Frisco detective, in going along a street, in the evening, had beheld a paper flutter from a lady's purse, and that, when he picked it up to return it to her, he saw written on it the name of the Shasta Six-Shooter.

The incident caused the lady to show much alarm and agitation, and she had hurried quickly away, as if to avoid observation.

Nevertheless, drawn by that name, the detective had shadowed and located her, and discovered that she was living with an elderly gentleman.

Then followed a description of the lady's personal appearance.

"Ruth Ransom!" was the Six-Shot Spotter's mental comment when he read the description. "That name on the piece of paper makes the matter certain. But why did she have my name written there?"

The Six-Shooter was in his room at the boarding house when he read this communication. He got up and walked nervously to and fro for a few moments; then came to the decision that he would go to 'Frisco on the next stage.

This resolution he carried into effect.

On arriving in the city, he went straight to the office of his detective friend.

He had found it impossible to keep cool, and as he entered the office, he was well aware that his face showed his mental disturbance.

The other detective observed the anxious look and closed the office door.

"That was a matter of some importance, then, that I wrote you about? I fancied it might be. You must have come straight from Shasta."

"A matter of very great importance. That woman, who is my sweetheart, mysteriously disappeared from Shasta several days ago. It was surely providence that threw her in your way."

Then he sat down, and, as quietly as he could, told the detective the story of his acquaintance with Ruth Ransom.

The 'Frisco detective looked at his watch.

"It's growing dark. I don't doubt the father and daughter are still there. Come and take supper with me, and by that time it will be late enough to make them a call."

The Six-Shooter wanted to hurry to the house at once, but the counsel of his friend prevailed, and it was more than an hour later before they took a car and proceeded toward that portion of the city which held the new residence of the Ransoms.

The Six-Shooter found the place was out in the suburbs, and somewhat isolated. It was clear that the Ransoms had gone there to escape observation, or because they wished to reduce expenses to a low figure.

The detectives were forced to walk several blocks.

As they neared the house, the Shasta Six-Shooter stopped and clutched his companion's arm. He had seen a slight form lift and creep through one of the windows.

The light was poor, but he was convinced that the invader of the house was none other than Hop Sing.

This discovery was of a character to thrill him to the utmost. What was Hop Sing doing there? And why was he thus entering the Ransom home?

"I tell you what, we will capture him! I want to lay hands on that scamp, anyway."

The Six-Shooter slipped up to the window after directing the other detective to hurry around to the front entrance and ring the bell.

The window was still up, but the room into which it opened was dark and nothing could be seen.

Then the Shasta Six-Shooter heard a startled cry, unmistakably in the voice of Ruth Ransom.

He jumped back from the window and ran along the wall toward a door he had observed.

It was a grievous error, for hardly had he left the window when there was a patter of light feet in the room and Hop Sing sprang through the window to the ground and darted away with almost incredible speed.

The door-bell was jingling under the hand of the 'Frisco detective, and as Ruth Ransom's cry rang out again in a heart-broken way, the Six-Shooter forced the door near him and ran into the house, calling aloud to attract her attention.

She was wildly startled when he appeared in the lighted corridor.

"It is gone!" she panted. "I had it in my lap, looking at it, when—when—"

As no one had answered the door-bell, the 'Frisco detective had also pushed into the house in the belief that murder was being done.

"I beg pardon for frightening you. But we heard you cry out and thought you needed help."

Ruth turned to look at the 'Frisco detective, who was the speaker, and then looked again at the Six-Shooter.

She could hardly disabuse her mind of the idea that the latter was a spirit rather than a man, for she was so unprepared to believe him in 'Frisco and in this house.

"What is gone?" the Six-Shooter questioned, his words showing his anxiety. "Tell us that, now, and afterward we'll explain how we came to be here. Who was that Chinaman?"

"It was Hop Sing. He came through the door, there, snatching it out of my lap and ran."

"Snatched what?"

"The diamond crown."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

IN PURSUIT OF HOP SING.

The Six-Shot Spotter did not stop for explanations, though the statement puzzled him beyond measure. He could not doubt, though, that the Chinaman had secured some article of great value, and he knew that prompt action was advisable.

So he ran out of the room, followed by the 'Frisco detective, and the two examined the garden and the street adjacent.

But they could discover nothing, and, in a little while, returned to the house, thinking it best to hear Ruth Ransom's story before proceeding further.

She was in a very hysteria of excitement and grief, and it was with some difficulty that they got her to quiet down sufficiently to tell them what they wished to know.

"It's a story I can trust you with," with a glance of confidence into the Six-Shooter's anxious face. "I know that, or I should very much hesitate to tell it."

"You seemed surprised when I said that Hop Sing had stolen from me a diamond crown. But that is just what he did. A diamond crown of great value, which belongs to the Rajah of Jutpore."

"It came into my father's hands in a way I do not now care to detail. I brought it here, after much consultation with Charley Berwick, and it was my intention to take the first steamer for India with the intention of returning the crown to its owner. We slipped away from Shasta in a private conveyance."

"There was another thing!"

Here she lowered her voice and looked cautiously about.

"It concerns my father. He is not in his right mind, as you have noticed. We came to the conclusion that he ought to be put somewhere for treatment, and since coming to this city, I have been searching for such a place. If he had proper care he might get well."

"We? Whom do you mean by that?"

"Mr. Berwick and myself."

"Then I am to understand that you came here at the advice of Mr. Berwick? That you were to take that valuable crown out of the country at his advice, and to place your father in an asylum?"

"Not altogether at his advice. We talked it over together and thought that was the best thing to be done."

The Six-Shooter remembered the transfer of the Happy Thought Mine and of the rustic cottage to English Charley, and felt more bewildered than ever. He could see that he had not been trusted with all the facts.

"Your father—"

"Her father? What's the matter with him?"

They turned to look into the snappy eyes

of Robert Ransom, for Ransom had entered the room unobserved, and had spoken.

Ruth leaped up with a cry of heart-broken anguish.

"The crown is gone! The diamond crown that I was to take back to the Rajah. What is to be done now?"

Robert Ransom stared, and seemed transfixed with astonishment. Then he broke into a fury of rage, which he at first seemed inclined to direct to the detectives.

"Where is it?"

Hastily she told him.

At the name of Hop Sing he shrank back with a cry, and then sank trembling into a chair, as if all the life had been sapped out of him.

Only for a moment, though, did he remain in this condition. Then he leaped to his feet, his eyes flashing fire.

"I will kill him! Where has he gone? We must get the crown back! It serves you right for wanting to return it to the Rajah! The Rajah has his millions, while we—"

He dashed out of the room, into the little garden, and, leaping the fence, hurried into the street.

Before they could get out of the house he was almost beyond call.

He paid no heed to Ruth, who shouted for him to come back.

Thereupon, the Shasta Six-Shooter, who wished a further word with Ruth, asked the 'Frisco detective to follow Ransom and see that he came to no harm, and went back into the house with the young woman.

They had an explanatory talk of a few moments' duration, when the Shasta Six-Shooter left the house and hurried after the 'Frisco detective.

The too came up with Ransom, after a time, and the Six-Shooter, using his powers of persuasion and argument, induced Ransom to go back home and await the turn of events.

"If the crown and Hop Sing can be found, we'll find them," he promised, as Ransom turned reluctantly away. "You may rest assured of that. We can do more than you, and you will assist us by going home and looking after your daughter."

"You want to marry her," Ransom whispered, in a tone loud enough for the 'Frisco detective to hear. "Bring back that crown and you may have her, if she'll have you."

CHAPTER XXXV.

FIGHTING CHINESE HIGHBINDERS

Through the heart of the famous Chinese quarter of San Francisco the Six-Shooter and the 'Frisco detective, whose name was Levi Lowther, took their way.

The time was after night. Chinese, in their queer garbs, swarmed everywhere, and the Chinese tongue was almost the only language heard.

Now and then they encountered a police officer, who recognized them and nodded in a familiar way.

At length they stopped in front of a big building, where a group of Chinamen were banging away on drums in the hideous Chinese fashion and extracting what a Chinaman conceives to be music.

It seemed to the detectives a din of hideous sound.

The building was a Chinese theater. The figure of an immense red dragon was reared over the door, and strange, Oriental posters and advertisements showed everywhere.

They paid their way into the theater and took seats where they could observe the people coming in or passing out.

There was no greater theater-lover among the Chinese on the Pacific Slope than Hop Sing, as the detective had discovered, and they thought it likely Hop might take in the play that night.

The stage was already filled with a company of players, Chinese kings and queens, with their attendants, the whole presenting a gorgeous picture of Oriental coloring, and the play, which had innumerable scenes and acts, dragging through weeks of performance, was at the height of its interest.

The detectives gave no heed to the play, but watched the entrances, for they were sure Hop Sing was in that portion of the city.

Suddenly the Six-Shooter started.

Hop Sing had not come into the room, but another Chinaman, whom he remembered having seen in Shasta.

This Chinaman had stopped just within the entrance, and now permitted his gaze to rove over the interior of the building in a lingering, searching way. When his eyes fell on the detectives, who were so closely observing him, he was seen to give a nervous start.

"We mustn't let him get out of our sight," the Six-Shooter whispered. "I am sure he is Hop Sing's messenger, sent here to see if the way is clear. He'll go right back and give Hop Sing warning!"

The Chinaman turned about and was making his way out of the place.

The detectives got out of their seats, and followed him without delay, reaching the street only a few steps behind him. He had hurried, but they had also hurried.

Now they saw him lift his fingers and give some kind of signal, and then he turned down the street, walking as rapidly as he could.

The detectives emerged into the street and looked about for Hop Sing.

The messenger had not been quick enough. They saw Hop Sing turn the nearest corner and hurry in the opposite direction.

Fortunately the street near the theater was not much crowded at the time, as most of the Chinese were within witnessing the performance. There they were able to keep within a reasonable distance of the crafty Celestial.

Still, all pursuit would probably have been unavailing but for a helping circumstance. Two other police officers crossed the street and walked in the direction taken by the messenger. Hop Sing, observing this, thought these officers the men he feared, and, to a large extent, lost his caution.

He turned into a narrower street, some distance above, and went on until he came to a Chinese tenement, which he was seen to enter.

"I believe we've got him!" the Shasta Six-Shooter excitedly whispered. "He's been hiding in that house, and, ten to one, the crowd is there now!"

On each side of the narrow way, Chinamen were seen bending at their toil, and a number of dirty Chinese children played in the street in front of the tenement, for the night was yet early.

The detectives pushed past these children, and, without stopping to summon any one, passed on into the house, through a doorway that opened against a blank inner wall.

There seemed to be here a building within a building, after the odd Chinese fashion, with a corridor between the two.

They had a warrant for Hop Sing's arrest, and so stepped boldly along this corridor, hoping to come on him at any moment.

As they did so a Chinaman interposed.

He could not speak English, and they could not speak Chinese.

For a moment they stared at each other, then the Shasta Six-Shooter took the Chinaman by the shoulder and drew him back out of the way.

His exclamation of anger rang out as an alarm, and partially aroused the occupants of the building.

The detectives feared this would reach Hop Sing, and so, paying no further heed to the Chinaman, they hurried on, keeping a sharp lookout for the man they sought.

A minute later they saw him, in a small rookery of a place.

He had been bending over some object that was in a box. Now, hearing their steps, he glanced up.

There was a look of surprise in his yellow face. Though he must have heard the cry, he had not thought that it referred to himself, and so had been, after all, caught napping.

The Six-Shooter leaped toward him, crying out for him to surrender.

Both of the officers were armed with

police batons, and this weapon was the thing the Six-Shooter now drew, instead of one of his trusty pistols.

Though surprised, the Chinaman dived into the box and snatched something from it which he pitched out of an open window.

He sprang for the window, too, a second later, but the delay had been too much. The Six-Shooter caught him by his pig-tail as he tried to climb to the sill.

"Not much you don't!"

The Six-Shooter pulled him back, with a heavy lurch that caused him to drop to the floor.

The other officer scrambled to the sill and looked down into the inner court, where the object had been hurled.

"Hey, stop that!" he yelled, swinging his club as a threat.

He saw the crown and a Chinese boy of fourteen or fifteen making off with it.

"Stop, there!"

The 'Frisco detective crashed through the window and into the court, without further ado, and began a vigorous pursuit.

The boy looked back and became desperately frightened. But he would not drop the crown.

A dozen Chinamen rushed out of little niches where they had been curled up to get a few winks of sleep. The whole tenement was waking up and beginning to pour out its occupants like a swarm of bees.

They were like angry bees, too, when they saw a white officer chasing a Chinese boy, and they yelled and shouted in a way to show their rage.

The officer was too fleet for the boy. After bounding up a flight of narrow steps he caught the boy, who, in his haste, had slipped and fallen, and so lost time.

Snatching the crown from the boy's trembling hands, the officer turned back, feeling pretty sure that the Six-Shooter would need all the help he could get.

In this he was not mistaken, for scarcely was Hop Sing in the toils, when he gave a peculiarly shrill and penetrating cry that brought a similar cry in answer.

The Shasta Six-Shooter was clinging to Hop Sing's shoulder.

"No more of that!" he warned.

"Whatee you do with Hop?"

"I'll not hurt you, if you go along with us peaceably. If you don't—"

He shook the club.

He heard Chinese calls going up, and Chinese outcries and questions, though none of them could he understand.

But that he wanted to wait for the return of the 'Frisco detective and was wildly anxious about the crown, he would probably have dragged Hop at once into the street.

Then he heard a cry of triumph, which told him that the 'Frisco detective had been successful, at least, in a measure, and soon after he saw the detective come running into view bearing the jeweled crown.

As the detective bounded into the room the Six-Shooter looked at the shining object in utter amazement. He could see, as he fancied, that the crown was almost beyond price, so thickly was it encrusted with glittering gems.

"How did it come into the possession of Ruth Ransom? Why does she want to take it back to the Rajah What's-His-Name? The whole thing is an incomprehensible muddle!"

So it was, and only confession on the part of those who knew all the facts could make it anything else.

The cries they had heard were increasing.

Hop Sing lifted his head and gave out another of those odd calls.

"If you do that again, Hop, I'll have to let you feel this club!" the Shasta Six-Shooter warned, pushing the Chinaman ahead of him and along the corridor.

But they soon saw that they were not to get out of the house without a fight. Hop Sing's cry had warned a number of Chinese Highbinders, to which organization he belonged, and they were rallying to rescue him from the officer's hands.

A half dozen of these Highbinders impeded their progress as they pushed on to-

toward the street entrance, but fell back before their clubs.

There were other Chinese crowding about the door, and, as the officers sought to get into the street with their prisoner, the Chinese made a combined rush.

It was touch and go for a few moments, with fierce yells and swinging batons, and the liveliest kind of a scrimmage.

But the batons proved too much for Chinese valor. A number of them had been knocked flat in the street and the others fell back before the determined clubbing.

The 'Frisco detective caught Hop Sing by the collar of his blouse and rushed him on down the street, while the Shasta Six-Shooter retreated slowly, facing the crowd now, with his revolvers drawn.

The sight of those revolvers had a very quieting effect. The Celestials knew very well what the weapons were, and the meaning of the threat; and, though they cried out vociferously, and other Chinese came running by the dozen, the officers were able to gain the wider street with their prisoner, where they sent up calls for assistance.

Two other officers responded with promptness, and three more joined them at the corner above, so that, when the Chinese Highbinders had fairly begun to rally their forces the chance of rescuing Hop Sing out of the officers' hands had virtually passed.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

VICTIMS OF A CLEVER FRAUD.

The officers crowded about Hop Sing, who had been ironed, and forced their way with an unbroken front up the street and out of the Chinese quarters, in spite of the resistance received.

Less than an hour later Hop Sing was behind the strong walls of a jail, from which it did not seem likely he could easily escape.

No sooner was the Chinese quarter left behind than the Shasta Six-Shooter took means to render the crown less conspicuous. Up to that time he had been forced to carry it exposed to view, and it really seemed a wonder that no one had torn it from his hands.

Probably because its value was wholly unknown it remained safely in his possession.

Now, going to the nearest station, he got a paper, in which he wrapped it, then boldly sallied out into the street, still carrying it in his hands.

The hour was comparatively early. The streets were filled with people and carriages coming from the theaters, and the cars were still running.

The Shasta Six-Shooter took one of these cars, with the crown held in his lap, as if it were a hat or a bonnet, or some object of but ordinary moment, and so rode along the streets of San Francisco without attracting a second look.

The very boldness of the thing rendered it perfectly safe.

Reaching the end of the car line he swung off, with the crown swinging carelessly in one hand, and took his way along the street toward the new home of the Ransoms.

He knew that Ruth would be anxiously waiting to hear the news and that she had been in a state of nervous unrest ever since his departure in pursuit of Hop Sing.

She rushed to the door to meet him, as soon as his steps and ring announced his return.

Then she looked at the package, with fervently clasped hands, for she knew what it held.

"You got it?" she fairly gasped. "Oh, it is entirely too good to be true!"

"Here is the proof! Look at it! I thought I ought to bring it here to show you that I succeeded. But why do you keep such a valuable thing where it may be stolen? It ought to be in a bank vault."

"I know it. I felt safe because I thought no one would dream I had such a thing."

"Just as I did when I came here. But it is foolish! You will lose it again if you do not put it where it will be safe."

She had removed the paper, and now, as

she looked carefully at the crown, she stepped back, with a startled cry.

"Some of the diamonds are gone!"

"Surely not!"

"There was a cluster of diamonds just here that is gone. I can't be mistaken. I remember just how it looked!"

Her anxiety was very great.

"But it can't be helped, and I do not blame you," as she rewrapped the crown and led the way into a room. "Perhaps they may be recovered."

The Six-Shooter was much distressed by the fact that, although he had brought back the crown, he had not brought it back as it was when taken away by Hop Sing. He did not doubt that Hop Sing had cut off the gems and had probably disposed of them for cash.

"I'll put the crown here for the present."

She indicated a trunk.

Then she took it from him and put it carefully in the trunk, which she locked.

"I shall be afraid, now, to sleep, or to let that trunk be for a moment out of my sight."

She turned up a light, and they sat down and began to talk, she asking a number of questions, which he answered. She was much relieved to know that Hop Sing was behind the strong walls of a prison, though, even there, she still feared him.

"Tell me about that crown," the Shasta Six-Shooter urged. "It has a history."

She hesitated a moment, and he could see that her features took on an anxious look. Then the hesitation passed.

"I'm ready to tell you, now! After you were gone, I thought the whole thing over, and decided that, as an officer, you were perhaps entitled to the knowledge—and the more so because of your assistance and friendship."

"Father"—here she looked around the room as if fearful he might enter—"Father took that crown from a bank in Bombay—took it without right, and from that wrong has grown all our present trouble!"

She seemed to think the Shasta Six-Shooter would shrink from her when she made that confession, and when she saw otherwise, her face lightened.

It was a pitiful confession which the Shasta Six-Shooter heard, for she held back nothing relating to the crown and its theft by her father.

She told how it had been concealed near the Happy Thought Mine by her father, how she came to discover its place of hiding and the particulars of the dreadful secret, and how, when she had concluded it to be her duty to try to restore it to the Rajah of Jutpore, she had resurrected it, and fled with it, and her father, to 'Frisco.

The Six-Shooter listened with pronounced interest and sympathy.

"And this little Englishman, Charles Berwick?" he asked.

She looked at him, almost pleadingly.

"Have I not told you enough?"

The shadow that rested on her face he drove away with a smile.

"Whatever you wish to tell, I shall be glad to hear. It is your privilege to say how much that shall be."

The relief visible in her face showed how much she thanked him.

He moved nearer and softly took one of her hands.

"I'm hoping that the time will soon come when you will not wish to have any secrets from me—when you will be ready to tell me everything, for I shall then be your husband."

She was silent, and the hand trembled.

"I'm not telling you anything you do not know, when I tell you how I love you and again ask you to consent to become my wife. Surely, I have earned a favorable answer by this time?"

"When my father's name is cleared."

She looked up with shining eyes, and he, stooping, reverently kissed her lips.

"I shall devote my life to you. Whatever is your wish is to me a command. I will go with you to India, if you desire; and, as for your father, I will assist in any arrangements you may wish to make for his comfort and treatment!"

He saw the tears come into her eyes.

"You love me, Ruth?"

There was no answer in words, but when

he put his arms about her and kissed her again, she did not resist.

From this dream of bliss they were startled by the abrupt entrance into the house of Robert Ransom.

He came directly into the apartment where they were sitting, and, stopping just within the doorway, looked quizzically at the detective.

"She's said she'd have ye, has she? Well, before you ask me anything about it you'd better get that crown."

Ruth started up, her face aflame.

"It is here, father—here in this trunk. Hop Sing has been arrested."

He ran to the trunk, and, when he found it locked, demanded the key.

He would not be satisfied until he had looked on the wonderful crown and knew that it was indeed safe. He did not observe that any of the gems had been removed, and she did not consider it wise to acquaint him with the fact.

He half danced around the room.

"That's all right! It's safe! You can go off and get married to-morrow, if you want to! And Hop Sing is in jail? Hurrah!"

To the detective, Ransom's insanity seemed to show itself more than ever.

At a late hour he took his departure.

"You may rest easy," were his parting words. "I'll have a man watch the house, so that no one can approach it without being seen. The crown will be perfectly secure here, and I promise that you shall not be troubled."

But he could not remain away. Ruth's charming presence drew him like a magnet, and before the forenoon was half-gone he was back again.

The crown was brought out of the trunk and re-inspected.

She was telling him the story once more, somewhat elaborating the details, when again the bell sounded.

When she went to the door, she beheld a stranger, who asked if Mr. Wagnell (the Six-Shooter) was not in the house.

The detective heard the words and came forward.

Then he saw that the man was from one of the pawnshops he had that morning visited.

"It's about that crown—or rather about the diamonds that were taken from it."

"You have found them?"

There was a secretive light in the fellow's eyes, and he stepped into the corridor.

"We find that we had already bought those diamonds before your arrival," he said, an apology in his tones.

As he had very strenuously denied anything of the kind at the time of the detective's visit, the latter thought this very strange, and did not hesitate to say so, as they went on into the sitting-room.

"The purchase was made by a clerk, and that is how I didn't know anything about it. But—"

He rubbed his hands oilily, and evidently hesitated to say what he had come to say.

"Those diamonds are nothing but paste!"

"What?"

"Nothing but paste, sir! I have had them tested by an expert. If that Chinaman can be got at, I want it done at once. Likely he still has the money I paid him!"

Though completely staggered by the statement, the detective inquired:

"And that's why you came here? You'd never have said anything about those diamonds if they'd been genuine. Isn't it so?"

The other continued to rub his hands and evaded the question by asking others:

"You said the Chinaman had been landed in jail, did you not? What jail? I will pay you well to help me, if the money is recovered."

Ruth, who had been too agitated to speak, now cried out:

"Do you suppose all the diamonds on the crown can be paste?"

It was a startling suggestion.

She ran to the trunk and got out the crown and showed it to the pawnbroker.

He seemed to take delight in telling her he believed they were paste, just the same as the ones he had bought the day before from Hop Sing.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE DIAMOND PUZZLE.

Ruth could not rest until the question was settled.

"Give us the name and address of the lapidary who pronounced those stones paste, and it may be I can do something for you," the Shasta Six-Shooter said, to the anxious pawnbroker.

He could not sympathize with the pawnbroker in his loss, for it was quite apparent that the pawnbroker had thought to profit in a dishonest way, and had only come with this bit of information when he discovered the cheat and hoped to recoup his loss.

The name and address were given.

For this the detective imparted the name of the jail in which Hop Sing was held, and some other information that the pawnbroker desired.

Then the latter left the house and hurried away. Robert Ransom came out of another room, his face showing he heard a good deal of the conversation.

"It's all a lie. Those gems are genuine. Don't I know? I sold three of them to a leading jeweler in New York—a man who could not have been deceived."

"Then there can be no question that they were genuine when—they they belonged to the Rajah of Jutpore?"

"No question that they're genuine, now, I tell you! That's all bosh—that pawnbroker's story. Where are you going?"

"To the lapidary's."

"Then I go with you. He's got some sense, I dare say. He must have been fooled. The things shown him couldn't have been from the crown!"

The Six-Shooter thought it as well for him to go as to stay. With him along, he could be kept under surveillance, and that seemed rather necessary.

Ruth was ready, in a comparatively short time, and all three left the house and went down-town on the horse car.

The Six-Shooter carried the crown, as he had before, folded up carelessly in a newspaper.

On entering the establishment of the lapidary, they were shown into a small back room.

There a little old man, with a bald head, whose eyes were as keen as eagles, in spite of his years, examined the gems with minute care before subjecting them to tests.

"I am quite sure they are paste," he said. "Just as were those brought me by the pawnbroker!"

And so it proved. Every gem in the crown was hardly of more value than so many bits of polished glass.

It was a depressing and overwhelming discovery. All Ruth's plans were thrown out. If the diamonds were paste, then there was no need to think of delivering them to the Rajah of Jutpore.

"It's quite clear," said the Shasta Six-Shooter, when the examination was ended, "that the gems were genuine when the crown was brought from India. Therefore, these paste ones must have been substituted here in this country. Where was it done, and who did it?"

A little later, when they were alone, he looked fixedly at Ruth, and asked:

"Do you think that could have been done by English Charley?"

"No, of course not!" she answered, with sudden emphasis. "Why should you think of such a thing?"

"Well, the thing struck me, and I thought I'd ask you about it."

"It is a most ridiculous idea," she declared, and there the subject dropped.

The mystery presented by the removal of the gems and the substitution of the paste ones was apparently so unfathomable that the pride of the detective was piqued, and he resolved to get at the truth of the matter.

To this task he devoted himself for two whole days, without accomplishing anything, other than convincing himself that he had a job on his hands worthy of his best efforts.

Ruth Ransom and her father had gone back to the cottage in the suburbs.

Of course, they were frequently visited by the Shasta Six-Shooter, who was more than ever in love, and, returning from

this house, one evening, he found a letter from Shasta awaiting him.

It had been written by Babylon Bill, and it was short and sweet.

"Come straight back," it said. "I need you, and have got the most wonderfullest story you ever heard to tell you about when you git hyar!"

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

BABYLON BILL TRIES TRAILING.

Babylon Bill had not been idle during the absence of the Six-Shot Spotter, but had set himself to watching English Charley. What he discovered occasioned the sending of the letter mentioned above.

Lying out in the shadows one night between the cottage and the town, he had beheld Captain Hawk approach the house.

It seemed to him that Hawk disappeared within the house, and this he found to be true, when he slipped up.

Hawk and Berwick were within, talking, though Babylon Bill could not determine just what they were talking about.

Once he approached the door, but beat a retreat and crouched again in the shadows.

"Your uncle is goin' to find if this hyar English Charley is the same chap what was in Hawk's band," he muttered, with eyes fixed on the door. "One minute I'm bettin' big that he is, an' the next minute I'm bettin' jist as big that he ain't! The thing's got to be settled."

In a little while Captain Hawk and the jockey came out of the house together, and softly closed the door after them. They had blown out the lamp.

They moved softly away from the house in the direction of the Happy Thought Mine, with Babylon Bill close at their heels.

Here they came near giving him the slip. This going to the mine was a precaution adopted to keep any one from following them.

Babylon Bill lay in the darkness outside, and for some time anxiously watched the door through which he had seen them pass.

He could hear no sound, and could see no light, and his suspicions were aroused.

Getting up from his recumbent position, he moved quietly around the building, and was just in time to see Captain Hawk and his companion vanish into a clump of trees on the upper slope.

Babylon Bill gazed after them in astonishment.

"If them two chaps don't know they're bein' watched, they're a-knowin' dyggun well that they ought to be watched."

It was clear that they had not remained in the building a second longer than was necessary to pass through it, and that they had hastened out and into the trees in the belief that such a course would baffle any would-be pursuers.

Babylon Bill shook his head sagely, and then shook his fist at the point where the men had disappeared, after which he proceeded as rapidly and silently as he could to that point.

Here he came in sight of them again. They seemed to have lost all caution, and were walking carelessly on, engaged in conversation.

Nevertheless, Babylon Bill had a good deal of trouble in keeping them in view and himself out of view.

That he accomplished it redounded to his credit as a trailer.

They did not go so very far, though the path they took was about the roughest the giant had ever traveled.

At one place a ledge was crossed, which was no more than two or three feet wide. A cataract tumbled below, and the roar of the water made such a din the coolest-headed was likely to grow confused.

Just beyond this perilous path, Babylon Bill came on the new camp of the outlaws.

The space it occupied was limited, but a few tents had been set up and some shelters hastily constructed of boughs and brushwood.

At one side, burning in a rocky angle, which hid it from the view of any one on the mountain slopes, a cheery camp-fire leaped, its light illuminating the camp and throwing the black cliffs into bold relief.

Three or four men came out of the tents on the approach of Captain Hawk and his

companion, and the entire party then grouped about the fire, and for a long time engaged in conversation.

Babylon Bill, who feared to descend into the hollow, and who was almost equally afraid to remain on the ledge, crowded against the wall near which he had dropped, and watched the scene with much interest.

Finally the camp-fire died down until it was but a bed of embers, and the increasing darkness began to hide all from his sight.

Then he plucked up courage and crept down the trail into the hollow.

A candle burnt in one of the tents, and this drew his attention.

Crawling up to the rear of this tent on his hands and knees, he softly lifted the canvas and peeped in.

He started, for he had hardly expected such good fortune. There, just before him, was the little Englishman, all alone.

The little man was seated at a table and was examining what seemed to be a plat or map of the Shasta Mountain district. He was no doubt studying this plat to learn the location of the various haunts to which the outlaws fled in times of peril.

His back was turned toward Babylon Bill, and the bold idea of capturing him flashed on the giant's mind.

It brought an expansive grin, a lifting of the canvas, and a forward movement.

When safely within the interior of the tent, Babylon Bill arose slowly to his feet, then he leaped forward with a springing bound, and clutched the little man by the throat.

It was his thought to get such a grip on the Englishman's windpipe that no alarm could be given, but in this he failed.

The fingers slipped, and, in the same instant, the table was knocked over and the candle dropped to the floor and went out.

A shrill yell arose from the Englishman, which was answered by a call at the tent door and a pattering of feet outside.

Babylon Bill saw he could not carry his plan into effect. If he lingered in an endeavor to make a prisoner of the little man, he would himself be made a prisoner.

Therefore he sprang to the rear of the tent, lifted the canvas, and was outside almost in the twinkling of an eye.

The feet were going toward the tent door, and he stood still in the darkness to listen.

He heard the scratching of a match and saw its gleam, then he heard the voice of Captain Hawk:

"What's the matter? What was it hurt you?"

"Some one jumped on me here in the tent and tried to choke me! I don't know who it was. I think he ran out that way as you came in!"

"Scatter, men!" came the instant command. "Don't let the scoundrel get away!"

"It's jist about time that the Bald Hornet from Brimstone Bar was a-movin' of his wings!" was Babylon Bill's thought.

Whereupon he put his long legs in motion and glided from the dangerous vicinity.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

CHARLEY ASSUMES A BOLD FRONT.

Babylon Bill did not go far, however, before he dropped to the ground in an open space, where he lay flat on his face and watched and listened.

The camp was in great commotion; questions were being asked and answered, and men were running here and there. Torches began to flash, too.

Then he heard voices, only a few feet away—the voices of the little Englishman and Captain Hawk.

Those voices could be recognized anywhere, for Captain Hawk's was peculiarly coarse and rasping, and the little man's peculiarly fine and effeminate.

Babylon Bill was well satisfied by this time that this was English Charley and no other. It would have needed strong proof, indeed, to convince him otherwise.

"And you didn't get to see who it was?"

"Not at all. Why, the thing was over so quick that I didn't hardly know any-

thing. The lamp went out, and I squalled, and the fellow leaped away, and, well—I guess that's all of it!"

"We've been followed from Shasta! Wonder if there's a guard in the pass?"

He moved away and began to call to a man going by.

Babylon Bill waited to hear no more. He wriggled on a few feet, then arose and ran at his best speed toward the pass.

He reached the entrance and gained the ledge before any one was sent to prevent his egress, and then, finding a hole at the side of the ledge, he crawled into it, and lay still again, to listen.

The guard came and took a position not a dozen feet away, and Babylon Bill was almost afraid to stir.

The hollow that held the camp was thoroughly searched.

More than once the giant was tempted to dash out and run for it up the trail, but he did not act on the impulse.

Then he saw the dawn begin to break, much to his surprise. So exciting had been the incidents of the trail and the camp entry that he had been unaware of the swift flight of time.

He now made up his mind to leave, but was kept from it by the changing of the guard, and by the fact that the new guard was none other than English Charley.

Captain Hawk came with English Charley to the place and talked there a few moments after the other guard had gone.

"You'll not need to stay here more than an hour. I wish you didn't have to stay at all. But the men don't like it if I favor you too much, you see!"

Having given this assurance of his friendship and good wishes, Captain Hawk went back to the camp.

English Charley took up the sentry's rifle, walked back and forth for a few seconds, and stopped beside a rock not three steps from where Babylon Bill lay.

The latter's heart beat like a trip-hammer. His breathing sounded so loud in his ears he was afraid the new sentry would hear him. A strong resolve was growing in his mind to capture the sentinel and carry him back to Shasta.

English Charley set his rifle against the rock, leaned on the rock with his elbows and looked down into the camp. The moment for action had come.

With a quick leap Babylon Bill passed over the intervening distance. His fingers did not slip this time, but clutched English Charley's throat so tightly and firmly that no cry could issue.

Then he dragged the little man up the trail, his clutch never slacking until they had passed beyond sight of the camp.

Here he set English Charley down, when, to his surprise, the little man, whose neck was black with the marks of the fingers, tumbled over as if dead.

Before English Charley regained his senses his hands had been bound with a handkerchief, but no gag had been forced between his lips.

He looked up, his face filled with fear.

"I cal-clate that if you've got a bit of sense in your noggin' you're ready to walk along this hyar ledge without makin' any fool breaks. If you'll move along quiet we'll have no trouble. If you don't, you'll git a pistol-ball into you and go into the canyon down there quicker'n a wink."

English Charley did not reply. He was literally shaking with fear.

However, he seemed to recover his courage in a degree, and, when the command to move on was given, he stepped along the ledge, in advance of Babylon Bill, without a protest.

The absence of the sentry was not discovered, probably, for some time. At any rate, there were no indications of pursuit, and, as English Charley did not try to hang back or offer any resistance, the trail was passed over at fair speed, and Shasta was gained.

"Hooroar!" Babylon Bill cried, driving the little Englishman before him into the streets of the camp. "Will somebody come hyar an' tell me who this road-agent is? I captured him in their camp this identical mornin'!"

Driving English Charley up to a box in front of the store, he removed the cords.

English Charley looked coolly over the crowd that was gathering and his lips curled in a sneer.

"You hear the statements of this driveling idiot! He asks you whether or not I am English Charley! The question itself shows that he don't know what he is talking about, for you who know me—and who is there in this camp who does not know me—are aware that I have never claimed to be any one else but English Charley!"

The audacity of the speech fairly confounded Babylon Bill.

"You've heard the Bald Hornet from Brimstone Bar toot his little horn before, haven't you? He says he captured me in an outlaw camp, and he tells other stories as wonderful as anything in the 'Arabian Nights.' He wants you to think him a very brave man!"

Babylon Bill stared at the speaker with dropping jaw and wide-open eyes.

"Everything he says is for effect. And let me tell you why! He wants to injure me with the people of Shasta. And his desire is born of revenge. You'd know his reason?"

"It's because I used my influence to get him turned from the door of the Ransom cottage, when he came there like an idiot and asked Miss Ruth to marry him!"

"Ow-wow! May the devil phly away wi'd the desavin' rascal! He towlt lies to me, thin!"

The words rose from the lips of irate Mrs. McCulish, who had arrived on the scene in time to hear English Charley's damaging statements.

CHAPTER XL.

BABYLON BILL BECOMES A BENEDICT.

Babylon Bill's homely face became gravity itself. He saw that the sympathy of the crowd was leaving him. And he had come into the town so bloated with confident triumph.

"I'll stand by you, Mrs. McCulish!" a big miner yelled, his face red with merri-ment. "We ain't got so many charmin' women in this hyar camp that we kin afford to see 'em treated in anything but the correct way."

"You bet!" went up in a chorus.

Babylon Bill tried to smile, and made of it a miserable failure.

"Pards, the widder an' me kin be depended on to agree, jist as soon as this other little diffickility is settled. The question before the house, now, is about this blessed bloomin' Englishman, what lies when he says I didn't bring him from a road-agent camp beyond the Blossom Divide this very mornin'!"

His manner was so serious that even those who had laughed began to think there might be something in his statements. They had heard queer rumors concerning the Englishman's double.

English Charley denied that he had been playing a double part, appealed to his history since coming to the camp, and asked that he be given a fair deal.

"I can't fight a giant like him, you know! Otherwise I'd meet him in any way he saw fit. If he says pistols, I'm agreeable, for it don't require a big fellow to pull a trigger!"

The widow chimed in again, and the wisest head there, when it was over, would have been puzzled to recount what was said during the next few minutes.

It ended in the coming of some officers, who knew well the character of Babylon as the friend of the Shasta Six-Shooter, and who procured a warrant for committing the Englishman to jail.

"We can hold him, maybe, till the Shasta Six-Shooter comes. Then we'll be guided by his decision in the matter."

Against this the protests of English Charley were in vain.

Nor could he get any one to become bondsman for him, for ugly rumors, that increased with the telling, began to creep over the town, and those who might have befriended him hesitated.

But long before this, Mrs. McCulish had caught the giant by the shoulder and marched him off to the boarding house.

It was comical to witness the manner in which Babylon Bill shrank before the

widow. Every peppery word that fell from her lips caused him to cower as if it were a blow from a whiplash.

"I tell you what, Mrs. McCulish, that there yarn of English Charley's was all a lie!" he protested, over and over.

"That you never thried to make love to Miss Ruth?"

She turned on him like an angry cat.

"Duggun' it, hear me through, won't ye? You git tangled up, all the while. Miss Ruth done me a powerful favor, onct, as you'll remember, when the road-agents had me harnessed to that mule, and of course—"

"Arrah, then ye did!"

He put out his hands, with an impatient gesture.

"I told you long ago, Mrs. McCulish, what it was I said to Miss Ruth, in a lovin' way, an' why I said it. Yes, I did ask her if she wouldn't marry me, fer I wanted to pay her—"

Mrs. McCulish's face began to flame anew. He saw the warning and took in sail.

"I wasn't dead in earnest 'bout it, ye know, like I was when I asked you the same question, widder. Confound it, if I've got any heart you've got the use and rent of it fer as many years as you want! I haven't give the thing away to anybody else, so I reckon it's still a-thumpin' hyar under my weskit!"

She turned away her face.

"And if you want it, an' me throwed in fer good weight, all you've got to do is to say the word!"

The way she snapped him up made his eyes stick out like knots on a log.

"I forgive yez. Whativer I said that hurt ye'r f'alins, don't remember it ag'in' me, Babby darlint!"

"Babby darlin'!"

He started up with a snort, but she had leaped toward him, and now clung to him with her arms about his neck.

"Babby darlin'! Oh, Lordy!"

"That's phwat I'll be callin' av yez now all the toime!" she whispered, nestling her withered face close against his homely one. "Yez towlt me afoor that I had ye'r heart, an' now ye say I may mintion the day."

"Yes," he admitted, in a sort of desperation.

A feeling that there was no escape except in marriage took possession of the High Roller.

She released him long enough to draw up a chair and sit down at his side, putting her hands again in his.

Then she called a servant.

"Jinny," as the girl tripped into the room and stood in open-mouthed amazement before them. "Mr. Babylon has axed me would I marry him the day, and I've tould him I would, wi'd pleasure. Will ye sind here the new pr'acher that kem' to Shasta last wake?"

Having given this order, she sent other orders to the cook for the preparation of a feast, and then, linking a hand in the arm of Babylon Bill, she walked with him to the office of the clerk, and together they procured a marriage license.

The servant had not been close-mouthed, and the news was flying over the camp as a prairie fire spreads under a high wind.

When Babylon Bill and Mrs. McCulish returned to the boarding house, they found the street in front of the place filling up with would-be spectators and guests.

They came by the dozens, and then by the scores. The street filled and the boarding house overflowed.

Babylon Bill began to feel that, after all, he was something of a lion—a social lion, if nothing more, and he thrust out his stomach as of yore and stepped about with the dignity of a barnyard rooster.

It was a great wedding, that of Babylon Bill and Mrs. McCulish, albeit it had come to pass with a good-deal of suddenness.

There was roast fowl galore, with game from the mountains and sauces from the city, and there was much talk and laughter, and when night drew on there was a howling Western dance that threatened to shake the building from its unsteady foundation.

CHAPTER XLI.

ENGLISH CHARLEY'S DESPERATE DASH.

An interruption came to the festivities through English Charley.

He had been incarcerated in the Shasta jail.

This depressed and discomfited him, though he did not seem to be so much humiliated by his situation as worried by the fear that he would have trouble in regaining his freedom.

To any and all who chose to talk to him on the subject, he admitted that he was the English Charley they knew, but insisted that he had not been near the outlaw camp, knew nothing of the outlaws or their whereabouts, and that the whole story was a thing of spite, concocted by Babylon Bill.

There were not a few who believed all he said, and there were many others, who, though in doubt, listened kindly.

Of the latter was the jailer—or rather the man who had charge of the cells.

English Charley talked to him a great deal throughout the day, and that night, after supper, he asked for pen, ink and paper.

"I want to write a letter to Mr. Ransom," he explained, "and to others."

The required articles were furnished, and for a long time the little man busied himself.

He stopped and listened to the sounds of merriment that came from Mrs. McCulish's boarding house.

He knew what the sounds meant, for the jail-keeper had not failed to acquaint him with the particulars of the laughable events of the day.

"Matters might be a good deal worse," he mused. "For one thing, there won't be anybody hanging around the jail. The people of the camp seem to be in a jolly good humor, and Judge Lynch's mobs are not made out of that kind of material."

After a time he enveloped and addressed one of the letters to Robert Ransom, 31—Street, San Francisco.

This letter he sealed and placed in his pocket.

The jailer had told him to pound on the floor whenever he was through.

This he now did.

Almost instantly he heard the man's feet in the corridor, and, though he did not rise from the table, his eyes took on a strange look, and he seemed to be steeling himself for some contemplated movement.

The key creaked in the lock and the cell door swung open.

"Ah, there you are! You're very prompt. I'm a thousand times obliged to you for these things, I'm sure."

He fiddled with the pen, which he held in the fingers of his right hand, and closely watched the jail-keeper as the latter advanced. The light from the corridor clearly illumined the cell.

Without a thought of suspicion the jail-keeper came up to the table and stooped to pick up the inkstand.

Before he could reach it, however, English Charley snatched it up and hurled the contents blindingly into the jailer's eyes.

The man fell backward with a howl of surprise and pain, and at the same instant the table went over with a crash.

It had been hurled over by the little Englishman, to add to the confusion of the moment.

With a desperate and flying leap, he gained the doorway and the corridor, and then ran down the corridor with the speed of a deer.

The jailer staggered to his feet, bellowing with rage, and tried to wipe the ink out of his eyes, and then, realizing fully what had occurred, as he heard the patter of the feet of the escaping prisoner, he cried out warningly to the other guards.

There was only one of these from whom English Charley had anything to fear.

He was standing near the front door, listening to the music and the dancing, but when he heard that cry, he ran back toward the cell, thus losing the opportunity of preventing English Charley from getting out of the prison.

From the corridor there was a clear path to the outer air, and English Charley, who crouched in a doorway while the guard

passed, now slipped out of his place of concealment, and succeeded in making his escape.

CHAPTER XLII.

THE LETTER FROM ENGLISH CHARLEY.

The Six-Shot Spotter was not anxious to hasten back to the camp of Shasta, but when he received that letter from Babylon Bill urging his immediate return, he did not hesitate.

He hurried with all haste to the Ransom cottage, to acquaint Ruth with the contents of the letter and his decision.

Hardly had he entered the house and begun to converse with her, when a cry from the room occupied by Robert Ransom drew their attention.

The mail had come in a few moments before. There had been one letter for Robert which Ruth had not observed, even though they got so few letters.

When they rushed into Ransom's room, drawn by his cry, which had something heartbroken in it, they found Ransom staring in an agonized way at a letter he had been reading, and which he now held in his hand.

Ruth flew to his side.

"What is it, father?"

He put the letter into her hands and glanced at the Shasta Six-Shooter.

The latter returned the look with a stare that was almost rude. He could not fail to observe the marked change in the countenance and in the general appearance of Robert Ransom. Ransom did not now seem a man bordering on lunacy, but in full and clear possession of all his faculties.

Ruth gave a startled exclamation as she read the letter, and her face became ashy white.

"I may show it—to—to—him, may I, father?"

"Yes," said Ransom. "Oh, my God! Is it not possible there is some mistake?"

Ruth, who had grown whiter and whiter, slid to the floor in a dead faint, and the Shasta Six-Shooter gave the letter no heed until after he and Ransom had succeeded in restoring her to consciousness.

Then he looked at the letter. It was from English Charley, and was directed to Captain Hawk.

It ran:

"Dear Captain—I am in jail here in this miserable hole, but I'll be out in a few minutes. I don't have any sort of doubt that you are hanging around the edges of the camp waiting for an opportunity to help me. My plans are all laid for thwarting the guard, and I do not think they will fail. Then I will be with you again, my love. Father and sister Ruth are in 'Frisco, where, let us hope, they will stay for a while. Anyway, till we can get away from here—from this horrible, perilous place. You promised me, you know, to take me to New York—or to some place where we could live happily together and forget all these awful dangers and hardships. I have been true to you. Who says a woman can't keep a secret. Surely you will not say it, after this. I shall send this letter by a faithful hand, should I not meet you in the edge of the camp—"

The Six-Shooter looked up in bewilderment.

"What does all this mean?"

Then he saw the envelope lying on the floor, bearing the Shasta postmark. It was addressed, also in English Charley's handwriting, to Robert Ransom, San Francisco.

"You don't mean to say?—you don't—"

Ransom's features resembled those of a corpse, so great was his agony; and Ruth was almost as distressed.

"We have never told you that—that English Charley is not a man—that he (or rather she) is my sister."

The Six-Shooter was utterly confounded.

"I never dreamed of such a thing."

"That is not the worst!" she sobbed.

"Do you not see what the letter reveals?"

"She has not been true to us! She—she—"

Ruth stopped, unable to continue.

"She has become the sweetheart of that scoundrel!" Ransom broke in, with sudden and fierce vindictiveness.

Instead of the blow crushing Ransom to

the earth and destroying his remnant of reason, it roused his dormant faculties. A terrible cry for revenge broke from his lips.

The full explanation, for which the detective was waiting, came from Ruth:

When Robert Ransom fled from England, with his two daughters, Ruth and Charlotte, to more effectually baffle pursuit, he had induced Charlotte to don male attire and masquerade as a young man.

This had now gone on so long that Charlotte was really more at home in man's clothing than in those better adapted to her sex.

Both Ruth and her father were inclined to blame themselves for Charlotte's downfall. As a pretended young man she had gone freely about the camp, and, it was clear, she had met and fallen in love with Captain Hawk.

The Six-Shooter felt forced to recount his adventures with English Charley in Hop Sing's laundry and in the outlaw camp, for he knew now, of course, that English Charley had no double.

At the same time he tried to word his accounts in a way to give the least pain to the heartbroken father and sister.

"Perhaps it would be well to keep this from coming to the knowledge of the people of Shasta," he suggested.

Ransom, who had been pacing up and down the room, in agony, broke in:

"My dear sir, the thing is impossible! Such a disgrace as this cannot be hid. Besides, the action I propose to take will make it impossible to hide it. I shall kill Captain Hawk, if I hang for it!"

CHAPTER XLIII.

ON A DANGEROUS TRAIL.

With his mind cleared of the fogs that had so long clouded it, Robert Ransom took his seat in the 'Frisco stage, for the purpose of making the trip to Shasta.

He was accompanied by his daughter and by the Shasta Six-Shooter.

The latter was very tender in his treatment of Ruth. She was the woman of his heart and now his affianced wife. As much as was possible, he desired to lift the sore trouble that weighed on her.

The preparations for the journey had been made with haste. All wanted to get back to Shasta. The letter which, through a mistake in mailing, Charlotte Ransom had sent to her father instead of to her lover, urged them to speed.

Once the stage was in motion, Ransom's impatience rose to a fever. The horses did not go fast enough to suit him. They seemed to crawl along at a snail's pace. The wings of an eagle would not have been sufficiently speedy.

At the stage stations, where halts were made for meals and to change horses, he would get out and walk about with nervous stride until the time came to start. He seldom spoke to any one, and his face had the set expression of marble.

Ruth became anxious for him, more anxious than if he had sunk into a lethargy.

This anxiety, with the thoughts that constantly obtruded concerning Charlotte, almost spoiled the joy she felt in the company of the man to whom her vows were plighted.

Through Ransom's rage, though it did not yet appreciably temper it, ran the disturbing feeling that he was responsible to a large degree for the conduct of Charlotte.

Ruth felt that she, too, was in a measure, to blame, inasmuch as she had not raised her voice against the scheme which placed Charlotte in male attire.

Though he did not once breathe his fears, the Six-Shooter was anxious for the termination of the trip, because he fancied danger impended from the road-agents.

He knew that if word got out ahead in time that he and others were bowling along toward Shasta on that particular coach, the road-agents would assuredly attempt its capture.

He based his hope that there would be no trouble on the belief that the road-agents could not know of their coming.

He found it a vain hope.

When the peril came, however, it was in a form different from anything anticipated. His terrible revolvers and his coat of mail were useless against it.

At a bend in the trail the coach crashed into an obstruction, and, turning half over, was hurled into the canyon below.

The horses were dragged along and fell to their death. But for the stout Concord stage the passengers would likewise have been killed.

One side of the stage was crushed in by the violence of the thirty-foot fall, and the Shasta Six-Shooter was hurled out on the rocks through the door, which flew open.

Ruth Ransom extricated herself from the wreck and dragged out her father, who was but little injured.

Then she looked around, and saw the detective lying as if dead, and the driver sitting a few feet away with a broken leg, and cursing in his picturesque fashion.

The horses were as dead as the stones that had crushed out their lives.

Ruth ran up to the unconscious detective.

At the same moment a revolver cracked on the ledge above, and the bullet chipped off a splinter from a section of granite just at hand.

The shot had come from a road-agent, and she saw that there were others on the trail.

Appealing to her father, she got him to help her draw the Shasta Six-Shooter close under the rocky wall, where he was beyond the reach of the revolver bullets, and then she applied herself to his restoration, almost forgetful of the injured driver.

The latter, however, showed his ability to take care of himself. No sooner did the firing commence than he dragged himself behind a big rock, and from that point returned the shots.

"Curse ye!" he gritted. "A revolver bullet's too good fer ye! Take that, you yaller-faced heathen!"

An outcry followed the shot, and a Chinaman pitched down from the ledge with a bullet in his brain.

In the bottom of the canyon close under the wall, there was a stream of water, and, dipping her handkerchief into it, Ruth bathed the face of the Six-Shooter. Then, drawing his flask from a pocket, she poured a few drops of the liquor through his shut teeth.

This had better effect, and the Shasta Six-Shooter soon afterward opened his eyes.

As soon as Ruth saw that he lived, she left him to regain strength, and, giving her father one of the revolvers from the Six-Shooter's belt, she took another, and prepared to return the fire of the outlaws.

Two of them had climbed to the top of a pinnacle farther down the trail, from which point they could shoot under the protecting shelf.

A shot struck in the water near Ruth's feet, sending up a shower of spray.

She saw that something must be done to stop this.

Catching a momentary glimpse of one of the outlaws, she lifted the heavy weapon, and when she pressed the trigger, she was pleased to see a puff of rock dust fly from the pinnacle's peak.

"Hit 'em ag'in!" cried the driver.

An instant before he had been moaning because of his broken leg; now he forgot his injury in admiration of the plucky markswoman.

Robert Ransom also fired, and it was some moments before an outlaw again showed his face.

Then the pinnacle spoke again, and the bullet cut through Ruth's dress, giving her a dreadful start.

She saw the puff of smoke, but she saw that the road-agent had got into a hole where it was almost impossible to reach him.

"Get back there, father! I'm afraid you will be hit."

"And you?"

She turned her head, to see the Six-Shooter at her side.

He was pale and weak; about his head he had tied the handkerchief she had left lying wet on his forehead; but he was himself again, resolute and determined, and

worth a dozen ordinary men, in a contest like this.

Ransom tossed him the revolver he had not been able to handle with satisfaction.

"So, we have a gun apiece! Better give me yours. Two is not too many for me!"

"But you may get hit out here!"

"The coat of mail!" tapping his breast. "They'll have to strike me in the head or limbs. My chances are good!"

She saw how useless it would be to argue the point, and how necessary it was for some one to return the fire of the scoundrels, who had gained the top of the pinnacle, and she crept back without further objection, sheltering herself behind the projection that screened her father.

Again there was a puff of smoke and a bullet from the top of the peak.

Instantly, in reply, spoke the deadly revolvers of the Shasta Six-Shooter. Nor did they speak without effect. The road-agent had thrust up his head and shoulders but for the fraction of a minute; but the time was long enough for the Shasta Six-Shooter to put two bullets through the rascal's right arm and shoulder, and place him hors de combat.

"Hooroar!" screamed the driver from his hollow. "Hit 'em ag'in!"

Hardly had he said it, when a ball from the pinnacle plowed into the earth where he lay, missing his head by but the fraction of a foot.

Again the Six-Shooter replied, and a cry told him the bullet had caught another.

Then he discovered that the two who had first ascended the pinnacle had been reinforced.

There was now a lively dodging and scrambling among the road-agents to get down from the position which was proving so perilous, and he increased their panic by throwing some more bullets into their midst.

"Hooroar!" the driver yelled again. "Shasta forever! Hyar she comes!"

And to their ears came the rumbling of an approaching stage-coach from the direction of the camp.

CHAPTER XLIV.

OUT OF THE CANYON.

The discomfited road-agents, driven back by the Six-Shot Spotter's galling revolver fire, retreated in sore dismay, when they discovered the approach of the stage from Shasta.

It was the regular 'Frisco stage, southward bound, and was well filled.

The stage people were thunderstruck when they found the other stage in the canyon, smashed to kindling wood, with the horses dead and the passengers and driver just ending a revolver duel with the road-agents.

Running to the canyon's rim, they looked down on the scene, and began to call, wonderingly.

In response the Six-Shooter showed himself, as did also Ruth and her father, when it was made clear that all danger was past.

"Throw a rope down hyar an' pull me out o' this, won't ye?" the driver begged. "My leg's bu'sted into knittin' needles an' I can't stand it any longer."

The poor fellow's condition was really serious.

But how to get the party out of the canyon was the problem that vexed the people from Shasta. The walls of the canyon were as steep as those of a house. There was not a place where a goat could ascend.

At the suggestion of the driver whose leg was broken, the lines were taken from the horses and fastened together for a rope that would reach to the bottom of the canyon.

Ordinarily it would not have been a very difficult feat for the Shasta Six-Shooter to ascend this, but it was quite out of the question for Ruth or her father, or for the injured stage driver, to do anything of the kind.

After much shouting back and forth, and much commanding and counter-commanding, the stage was turned about, with only the driver on the box, and was sent rolling down to Shasta as fast as the horses could take it, for the purpose of there securing such tackle and assistance as were needed.

The passengers remained on the ledge,

and there was much talking and explaining between them and the people in the canyon during the time occupied by the stage in its round trip.

The Six-Shooter took the stage-driver in hand, and did all he could to make the man comfortable. But the man needed the attention of a surgeon, and there was little enough of that the detective could do.

When the stage came back it brought a knot of people, and the "Hooroar" that went up told that Babylon Bill was of the number.

But Babylon Bill was not alone; his better or "worse" half, the late Widow McCulish, accompanied him.

Some fire ladders had been brought on top of the stage, and these, spliced, were lowered and set up against the canyon wall.

In addition, a sort of hanging basket or cradle was improvised of ropes and blankets brought for the purpose, and the injured driver was hoisted out of the canyon by means of it.

Ruth and her father mounted by the ladders.

The Six-Shooter was much weaker, though, than either he or his friends had dreamed.

His fall into the canyon had been a serious thing, and he had not for an instant since the restoration of his senses, been free of a suggestive dizziness, though he had not much remarked on it.

This dizziness made itself manifest when he tried to ascend the ladder. When more than halfway up a feeling of sickness and blinding giddiness came over him, the world turned dark, and, losing his hold, he dropped downward like a lump of lead.

A startled cry went up from those who witnessed the fall, and Ruth's own senses reeled. For an instant she feared he had been instantly killed. But, as if to reassure her, he tried to rise to his feet—a thing he could not do.

Sympathizing men sprang down the ladder and lifted him, and when they found he was not as hurt as they had feared, they shouted up the announcement.

Then the basket contrivance was lowered and the Shasta Six-Shooter was drawn up as the driver had been.

The delight of Babylon Bill was unbounded, and he was the first at the basket's edge to lift his friend out on the ledge.

"Hard lines, ole pard! But, duggun' it, you're a-showin' that you're a man what road-agents ner nothin' can't kill, an' 'm proud of ye!"

The Six-Shooter and the driver were made as comfortable as possible on the inside of the vehicle, where places were also given Ruth and her father.

Then, with all the others on top, the stage was headed once more for Shasta.

The driver was given into the hands of a surgeon, and the Six-Shooter was borne to the boarding-house presided over by the late relict of Mr. McCulish, now known to Shasta fame as Mrs. Babylon.

There he was made comfortable, and, nursed by Ruth, there was no doubt entertained of his speedy recovery.

Robert Ransom did not remain long at the boarding-house—only long enough to see that the Shasta Six-Shooter was doing well.

Then he hastened out into the camp.

First, he took his way to the office of the lawyer who had drawn the deed giving the Happy Thought Mine and the other property to Charles Berwick.

"What is said as client to attorney is always considered an inviolable secret?" he asked, dropping into a chair, and looking at the attorney with anxious, questioning eyes.

He received a reply in the affirmative.

"You have heard the news about the wrecking of the stage and all that? You cannot dream, though, of what I am to tell you! The man whom you thought Charles Berwick, or English Charley, is not a man at all, but my own daughter, Charlotte Ransom!"

The attorney smiled, though he dropped his pencil, so great was his surprise.

"Under the circumstances, couldn't that

property be got back without much trouble?"

"It may have been conveyed to other parties—innocent purchasers. In that event, and in any event—"

"Let's go to the recorder's and ascertain."

Ransom's impatience was of a feverish kind. He fairly dragged the attorney out of the place and to the office of the recorder, where they found that no transfers of the property from Charles Berwick had been filed for record.

"My advice to you, Mr. Ransom, is that you find your daughter and endeavor to settle this matter in an amicable way. I can see that you will want to keep the thing a secret."

"Find her! My God! I wish I could find her!"

He left the attorney's in a desperate frame of mind, and walked out toward the rustic cottage. Darkness was already falling.

He passed the cottage with a heart pang and went toward the mine building. He had no very well defined plan. He was simply hoping against hope that his daughter Charlotte might be in the vicinity, for he knew when and how she had escaped from the jail.

He could not hide from himself, however, the probability that she was somewhere on the dark slopes of Mount Shasta, in the company of her road-agent lover, Captain Hawk.

As he approached the building a form leaped upon him from behind a tree and bore him quickly to the earth.

He believed it to be the form of Captain Hawk, and the fierce rage that swelled in his breast so increased his strength and courage that he hurled off his assailant.

Then he saw that it was none other than Hop Sing.

He was bewildered beyond measure at seeing Hop Sing there—Hop Sing, whom he had thought safe enough in the 'Frisco jail.

Hop Sing's yellow face was working with rage as he sprang up and again rushed on Ransom.

This time he tried to drag Ransom toward the mine building, and at the same time sought to get out a cord and loop it about Ransom's throat.

Ransom defended himself to the best of his ability, and caught the agile Chinaman about the waist.

Thus they struggled to and fro, drawing every moment nearer the little lake that was formed by the water from the log flume.

As they swayed on the slippery rocks a sharp whistle cut the air.

It came from farther up the hillside, and when Hop Sing heard it he wrenched himself from Ransom's grasp and bounded away.

"Well, that's as singular a thing as I ever saw," feeling of his bruised throat and looking in the direction the Chinaman had gone. "Some of his pards must be up there. Perhaps some of the road-agents. Perhaps—"

He shook as with an ague and seemed about to fall, but it was not wholly because of his recent exertions. The thought had come that probably Charlotte was up there on the slope.

Impelled by it and made forgetful of the danger, he hastened along after Hop Sing, with his head bent in a listening attitude.

But he heard nothing. Hop Sing had disappeared, together with the one who had given out that whistle, and the lava hillside seemed utterly bereft of life.

Ransom stood alone in the thickening darkness, distracted and torn by an anguish as great as man ever felt. Where was his daughter? Where, on all that wrinkled mountain?

A low moan broke from his lips.

"Oh, Lord! I have sinned, and this is the penalty. I have sown to the wind, and now I reap the whirlwind."

He bared his head to the breeze, for it seemed that his brain was on fire, and then, after another interval of agonizing suspense, he turned brokenly back toward the mine building and the cottage.

CHAPTER XLV.

THE DEED OF A FIEND.

The Six-Shot Spotter lay on a cot in an upper room of the boarding house. He had been sitting up in a chair a short time before, and had declared himself so much better that he believed he could go downtown.

This idea had been promptly vetoed by Ruth Ransom, who asserted he should do no such thing until he had entirely recovered, and he, yielding to her gentle persuasion, had returned to the cot, where he lay, looking at her, admiring her beauty, and feeling so happy and lazy that he would not have objected to lying there forever in that cozily pleasurable mood.

From all this he was aroused by a light step, and an exclamation—the latter from Ruth; and, looking up, he was astonished and dismayed on beholding the yellow visage of Hop Sing.

The time was later than that in which occurred the incidents depicted in the previous chapter.

Hop Sing's eyes were glittering strangely. Without an instant's hesitation he crossed the floor and stood before the cot.

The Shasta Six-Shooter half-rose with a question.

"Whatee do with clown? Whatee do with diamonds?"

Hop Sing was still laboring under the delusion that the diamonds were real gems, and was under the further delusion that the crown had been brought back to Shasta, when, in truth, it had been left for safe keeping in 'Frisco."

"How did you get here?" the detective blurted.

"Clown!" Hop Sing demanded, stretching out his yellow hand.

That he had come on the stage following the one which had been wrecked was not a thing he cared to waste time in explaining.

Ruth stood, hesitating, uncertain whether to cry out for assistance or rush from the room.

Unfortunately for the Shasta Six-Shooter, his pistols were not under his pillow.

However, he lifted himself, coolly.

"I don't know how you got out of jail, Hop Sing, nor how you got here, but I can tell you that you've come on a fool's errand."

With this sharp preliminary, he acquainted the Chinaman with the facts in the case, hoping their mere recital would induce him to withdraw.

The Chinaman heard the story, at first, with disbelief, and then, when its truth was forced on him, a great rage shone in his face.

"You fool, Hop Sing!"

He glared about the room for an instant, then drew something from his blouse and dashed it fiercely to the floor. At the same time he leaped backward through the doorway.

A fiery explosion followed. The very air seemed to flame, and a dreadful stench, that was suffocating in the extreme, filled the apartment.

Hop Sing had hurled to the floor, with exploding force, some devilish Chinese compound.

The occupants of the room were thrown backward—the girl to the floor and the detective back on the cot, and the cot, catching fire, began to burn with furious intensity.

The Six-Shooter, who felt as if some great weight were pressing against his chest and throat, tried to get to his feet, but his reeling senses held him down.

The sound of the explosion had filled the house, even as the fumes were doing, and when Hop Sing dashed through the doorway and attempted to run down the stairs, he ran "biff!" into Mrs. Babylon.

They fell together, in a struggling heap, on the stairway.

That energetic lady knew something was wrong and did not propose to let Hop Sing escape. As she went down, she uttered a yell that pierced to every corner of the establishment, and made a grab for Hop Sing's queue.

Hop Sing, who knew that haste was imperative, was clambering up, but a sharp

yank on the queue brought him down again with a yell of pain.

He heard steps below and was resolved to escape at all hazards. Therefore, exerting all his strength, he pushed his antagonist from him, and at the same moment set his yellow fingers in her hair.

She released her hold of the pigtail to save herself from rolling down the stairs, and the mass of hair in which Hop Sing had set his fingers came away in his hands.

He stood for a moment as if petrified, staring at the bald pate thus presented to his view. For an instant he thought he had torn away the woman's scalp.

As for Mrs. Babylon, her confusion was only equalled by her rage, for she heard her husband's voice and her husband's step close at hand—and alas! Babylon Bill was all unaware of her hirsute deception.

Babylon Bill turned the corner of the corridor at that instant, and put a foot on the first step.

Mrs. Babylon, who had lost all hold, went sliding and bumping down, and almost rolled into his arms, though for a moment he could not believe that it was Mrs. Babylon.

Hop Sing made the best possible use of the time given. He leaped down the stairs at perilous speed, dropping the wig as he did so, and, springing past both Babylon and Mrs. Babylon, he made a dash to get out of the house.

"What in tarnation!" Babylon roared, standing stock still.

He saw the bald head of his spouse and the wig on the stair, and, above, he heard the roar of fire, while his nostrils were assailed by the horrible stench coming down from those upper rooms.

Mrs. Babylon strove to get on her feet, and made a dive for the wig.

But Babylon Bill picked it up with an air that fairly frightened her and put it in his pocket.

"Madam, what's a-goin' on up-stairs? Without further evidence I should judge that a grizzly an' a skunk had got into a fight and had kicked over the lamp and set the house afire!"

From his words she could not tell whether he was angered or perplexed and annoyed.

A cry was heard behind him, and he wheeled about, to see Hop Sing dash back along the corridor toward the front entrance.

Hop Sing had found the rear door locked.

"Stop!" rushing after him on the impulse of the moment. "You scoundrelly heathen, stop an' say what deviltry you've been up to!"

Mrs. Babylon looked for a moment after her spouse, and then, throwing a shawl over her head to conceal its baldness, she essayed to ascend the stairs.

"She found it impossible. The choking odor that came down seemed to drive the air out of her lungs and paralyze her faculties, and she retreated, reeling, and on the point of falling in a faint.

Babylon Bill, in close chase of Hop Sing, had leaped toward the front entrance.

"Stop him!" the giant continued to bel-
low.

His calls drew a crowd, but the nimble Chinaman cunningly turned aside before the front door was reached, and ran to a window overlooking the garden.

This window he smashed with a kick, and then leaped out into the darkness.

It was a narrow squeeze for the Chinaman, for Babylon Bill was hardly a yard behind and stretched out his hands to catch Hop as he went through the window.

Without a moment's hesitation, Babylon Bill sprang through after Hop Sing, and he made the spring so quickly that he almost fell on the Chinaman, who had slipped from his feet and had been thus delayed.

"Hold on there, duggun' ye!"

But Hop Sing had no intention of doing anything of the sort. He knocked down the hand extended to detain him, and sprang away again.

Then came a chase for the end of the garden; and it was really wonderful how rapidly the giant got over the ground. More than once it seemed he would certainly overtake the Chinaman, and he could

even in fancy feel his fingers close on the streaming pigtail; but each time the agile Chinaman writhed aside and evaded the clutch.

Hop Sing went over the garden fence at a flying leap, and the big fellow, in trying to do the same, caught his toe and was hurled sprawling.

Before he could recover, Hop Sing was out of sight.

"Go it, duggun' ye. I could 'a' shot ye, if I'd been so minded, and mebbe I was a fool fer not doin' it. Hows'ever, there's more days a-comin', an' more chances, an' we'll git you yet."

"What's that?"

He turned, and what he saw and heard drew him back to the house.

CHAPTER XLVI.

FIGHTING FIRE.

Mrs. Babylon's voice was screaming out in terror, and flames were issuing from an upper window. The building and the people in it were in danger.

Babylon Bill, hastening back, crawled in through a rear door and entered the house.

Servants were rushing here and there in wild excitement, and sounds from the street told that people were hurrying to fight the fire. A bell began to jangle in an alarming way somewhere down-town, and the whistle of the nearest stamp mill emitted an ear-piercing screech.

While it has taken some space and time to tell it, a very few moments had really elapsed since Hop Sing had dashed the Chinese explosive to the floor.

As Babylon Bill gained the corridor that led to the foot of the stairs, he found Mrs. Babylon retreating with the shawl over her head.

He caught her by the arm, to make an inquiry, and pulled away the shawl.

She started back with a cry when she saw who it was.

Her bald pate glistened under the light like a full moon.

Babylon Bill stared hard at her and then tossed her the wig.

"Woman, you'd better put that there on to keep a cold off. It's the fu'st time I ever knowed that you'd run afoul of an Injun scalpin' knife in ye'r youth. But wigs is cheap, and most folks—some folks—is pesky blind. What's the racket up-stairs?"

She grabbed the wig, gurgled an inarticulate reply, and motioned toward the fire.

Babylon Bill ran forward and tried to mount the stairway, but the choking odor drove him back. A gust of flame swept down the stairway, too, and warned him of the peril.

He retreated in momentary dismay and hesitation. Then he darted into the nearest bedroom, from whence he returned with a wet blanket, which he had partially soaked with water from the pitcher.

This blanket he used as a shield, and dashed up the stairway.

By a heroic effort he succeeded in gaining the room, though the blanket was scorched and the stench almost floored him.

After rushing through the fire that flamed out through the door, he found himself in a space that was free, but which was chokingly filled with the odor. This odor seemed to emanate from a suffocating gas, whose effects were like those of fire damp or carbonic acid gas.

The cot and the corner of the room in which it rested were all on fire.

The Six-Shooter was not lying, however, on the cot.

Before his senses deserted him he had succeeded in hurling himself to the floor. After that he had tried to reach Ruth Ransom.

In this last he had failed, and the two lay not far from each other, near the center of the room, to all appearances dead.

Babylon Bill felt that it was almost as much as his life was worth to remain in that room a single minute. A choking hand seemed to clutch his throat, his lungs appeared to be inhaling fire, and he felt that his senses were leaving him.

Still he would not desert these friends.

He saw how impossible it was to carry

them through the doorway and down the stairs.

Summoning all his failing strength, he stepped to the nearest window and opened a passage to the outer atmosphere by kicking away the sash.

A puff of gratefully cool air came in, like a touch of healing.

He had a momentary glimpse of a street filled with people and heard excited cries.

Then he ran back, and, picking up the girl, he carried her close to the window.

He dragged the detective to the same place.

Then again he looked out, while the fire behind him roared louder and louder and the heat grew more intense.

Thrusting his head out as far as he could, Babylon Bill shouted to the men in the street.

Looking along the wall he saw that flames were leaping from the window nearest him, and the feeling came that the whole house was doomed.

His experience in mines told him that these deadly gases were deadliest near the floor, and so, after shouting his heeds to the people, he picked Ruth up and held her head to the window, that the pure air might revive her.

Its effects were good. She moaned and stirred.

It was like thrusting her back into the jaws of death to return her to the floor, but he did it, and held the Six-Shooter up to the window.

His own condition was, at the same time, enough to frighten any one. An effort was needed to keep his mind to the task in hand, and as he worked he reeled to and fro like a drunken man. But for the pure air that came in he would have fallen, and the lives of all three would have been lost.

Some ladders were hurried to the house and spliced and hoisted, and several young men climbed to the window.

Babylon Bill had fallen to his knees, but he drew himself up and handed the unconscious form of the girl out into their arms.

She was borne safely down, and given into the hands of some women, who hurried away with her to effect her restoration.

The rescuing young men crowded back on the ladder, and Babylon Bill, exerting his waning strength, drew the Shasta Six-Shooter to the window and lifted him to the ledge.

Two young men grasped the Six-Shooter and drew him through the window and began to descend, while other men swarmed upward to render them assistance.

The crowd below was fairly screaming with excitement; hands and hats were swinging, commands were issuing, and a perfect pandemonium of sound reigned.

No one noticed that more men were crowding on the spliced ladder than were needed or its strength justified, until it snapped under their weight.

Then a great cry arose, and several sought to leap to the ground.

Their efforts but precipitated the catastrophe.

The ladder broke in two, and the Six-Shooter and those who were carrying him were precipitated to the earth.

Babylon Bill, who had sunk back to the floor, lifted himself with difficulty and looked out.

What he saw somewhat aroused him and made him able to shake off, in a measure, the dullness that was stealing away his senses.

The room was growing hotter and hotter, the fire was spreading, and he could no longer stay where he was. It was a question if he could remain there until the ladders could be rejoined and again set up.

The men in the street were working to this end, though under difficulties. One of the ladders had been broken in the fall, and the binding ropes were all in a snarl.

Babylon's face was seen at the window, and several persons shouted encouragingly to him. One man yelled for him to jump. Bill knew, however, that such a leap endangered limb and life.

But that strange lethargy was again creeping over him; the faces were blur-

ring, the calls were growing confused, and the desire to escape from the room was passing away. His interest in life was waning. He was like one dropping into sleep.

He fell back into the room, where he lay prone on the floor, while the fire raged and roared and crept every moment nearer.

From this he was aroused by a hand that vigorously shook him; and, staring up, in a dizzy, dreamy way, he beheld the familiar features of his wife.

She was swathed from head to foot in water-soaked blankets, and had risked her life to reach him.

She had not come into the room by way of the fire-filled staircase, nor by the window, but had descended through a scuttle by means of a short ladder which she had lowered.

All that had required courage of a high order. Seeing that the fire blocked the stairway, and realizing the peril of her husband, as well as of the others hemmed in the room, she had secured the ladder, and had mounted, by another stairway in the rear of the building, to the third floor of the boarding house.

It seemed at first glance that the fire was even more fierce here than on the floor below. There was nothing above her head but the shingled roof, for this part of the building was, as yet, unfinished.

Perfectly familiar with it, however, she worked her way along, protected by the blankets, until she gained the small cubbyhole of a place above the room she sought.

Here, lifting the hatch, she had thrust the ladder almost down into the fire, and by it had descended.

She shook Babylon again and again, and shouted to more thoroughly arouse him.

"Up the ladder, there, quick!" she urged. "L'ave me hilf yez!"

And, being a strong woman, she fairly dragged him to his feet.

Thus roused and stimulated, Bill struggled to an erect position, and she assisted him to the foot of the ladder.

The fire was swirling all about them, and to protect him she threw one of the blankets over his head and shoulders.

Her face and hands were scorching, but she never wavered.

Then she climbed up beneath him, helping him all she could; and he, growing stronger each instant, struggled on until he reached and crept through the scuttle.

Fortunately her burns were not of a serious character. Her eyebrows were singed away and her fingers were blistered. She had little or no natural hair, as has been seen, and the wig, which she had replaced, had served to shield her head.

Again with her words she aided Babylon and urged him to new effort; and, with the whole upper part of the house now raging like a furnace, they hastened on, until they came to the stairway, by which they descended to the floors below.

The life of Babylon Bill had been saved by his wife!

"There's purtier women," was his after comment, "but I'm hyar fer to contend that there hain't a better ner a braver on the whole Pacific slope!"

CHAPTER XLVII.

FATHER AND DAUGHTER.

After his encounter with Hop Sing, Robert Ransom turned back from the slope of the hill and descended to the rustic cottage.

The night was not darker nor gloomier than the shadows that held possession of his soul. In his anguish he cried aloud for his daughter Charlotte, though he anticipated no reply.

Entering the cottage, he felt for the lamp in its familiar place, and, having found it, lighted it and set it on a table.

Then he unlocked and opened a trunk and began to rummage through its contents.

So absorbed did he become in this that he did not hear the light step nor the gentle opening of the door, and knew not

that Charlotte was in the room until she spoke.

He turned with a convulsive start.

She was but dimly revealed in the semi-shadows near the door.

As he stared at her, words escaped his lips, and he fell back, moaning, against the trunk.

He quickly recovered, however, and sat up.

"Do you think me a spirit?" she asked, crossing the room and coolly taking a chair. "I didn't think of scaring you, or I should have made more noise as I came in."

His whole form was trembling.

"I wish you were a spirit!" he whispered, with bitter emphasis. "Better dead than what you are!"

She was dressed in her customary masculine attire, and seemed the jockey known to these pages. She locked her hands behind her head, tilted back in the chair, and was silent, though he could clearly see she was far from pleased.

"I don't see why you should say that! I am not all bad. For instance, I have come back here to let you know that I'm still alive, and to assure you that I'm better than appearances may seem to indicate. Of course, you got that letter which I was careless enough to put in the wrong envelope?"

He looked so much like a ghost himself that her pity was aroused, and her words took a kindlier tone. With an effort, he drew himself up, closed the lid of the trunk, and sat on it.

"You needn't stare at me as if I were a monster!" she asserted, with a sudden show of warmth. "Whatever I may be, I'm what you made me! You shouldn't forget that!"

"What do you mean, Charlotte?"

He used the old familiar name of her childhood days—a name which, through fear, he had not recently addressed her by.

But its use failed to touch her.

"I mean just what I say! There's no use to try to hide anything, since I was fool enough to let you get that letter. But when you put me in these clothes and permitted me to associate promiscuously with boys and men for the purpose of creating a deception that would shield you, you placed me in the wrong path; and you ought not to be surprised that I took it!"

"I met the man you know as Captain Hawk. I fell in love with him. I even married him!"

He gave a start.

"It is true! I married Captain Hawk secretly in 'Frisco four months ago. You know when I went up there? That was the time! And I married him under my own name, and a clergyman tied the knot, as you can ascertain if you will look up the records!"

"So I tell you again, I am not the brazen creature you have believed me. I am Captain Hawk's wife. And I am his wife because I love him and he loves me. I became a member of his band of road-agents, and I proved to them, as I must have proved to you, that a woman can keep a secret!"

She tapped the floor defiantly with one small foot, and closely scanned her father's pallid features.

He sat as if turned to stone.

"When I first met Hawk, and gave him my heart unasked—yes, I was foolish in that, I suppose—I did not know he was a road-agent! But, when the knowledge came to me I would not desert him, for I remembered that—"

She hesitated.

"What?"

"That my own father was also a thief, and I oughtn't to be too particular in such a thing. The thief's blood ran in my own veins!"

He leaped from the trunk as if stung, and seemed about to rush on her, but calmed himself.

"Charlotte!"

"I have been wanting to say these things for a long time, as a defense for what I've done. Now the time is here to speak plainly. Likely I should have

been little different from what I am if I had never seen men's clothing, for the thief's blood is in my veins! I know it, because of the admiration I have for them when they do a stirring or heroic deed of robbery! I even admire, in a way, what you did in your earlier days!"

"I'm speaking plainly. Hear me through. You robbed the Bombay bank of that crown! It was a daring robbery! A great robbery! But you've been too timid to profit by it. Had it been the act of Captain Hawk, he would have got the money for those gems long ago! But you—you were too conscientious, or too weak, after—"

Again he half lifted himself from the trunk, but quickly sank back, and stammered:

"Was it you who took those diamonds and substituted the diamonds of paste? Speak?"

She rocked the chair to and fro on its hind legs.

"Yes! I did it when I was in 'Frisco, at the time I married Captain Hawk. I took the crown down there with me; I removed the real gems and sold them, and substituted the ones on the crown now!"

How changed she was from the innocent girl he had thought her was shown by the smile with which she announced this gigantic wrong.

"You stole the crown from the bank or the Rajah; why should I hesitate in stealing the diamonds from you? Which was the greater crime?"

He clinched his hands together.

"Listen to me, Charlotte. What you tell me breaks my heart! I sowed to the wind and I reap the whirlwind! There is no escaping the law! But why should you talk of thief's blood? Are you different from your sister Ruth?"

"Look at me and answer the question yourself? I resemble you in face and form, except that I am a woman. Ruth resembles mother!"

"But let us not be enemies, father! I shall go my way, and, of course, you will go yours. But can't we still be father and daughter?"

"Murderess!" he whispered. "You are murdering me! You—"

She got up from the chair, and he, thinking she meant to leave the room, put himself in front of her.

A bitter laugh came from her lips.

"I'm not afraid you'll hurt me, father, or detain me! Captain Hawk is waiting for me, and I have promised to obey Captain Hawk, even against my own father. As for calling me murderess—well, perhaps I deserve the title."

"I killed Bendigo!"

He fell back before the fiery glance of her eye.

"Yes, I killed Bendigo! Do you know why? It was because he deserved to be killed, and because I was angered and excited. But I didn't mean to involve you in trouble when I used your pistol, and forgetfully dropped it on the slope. Now, let me pass!"

But he would not. He stood before her, half fiercely, half pleadingly, barring her from the door.

"Stay in this room. As your father, I command it. You shall not go out of this place. You shall not again meet that outlaw captain, and if he tries to take you, there will be more murder done."

She stepped back, with a scornful smile, and yet with an air of irritation.

"Shall I call my husband? You are my father, but you are no longer the man I obey. I obey only Captain Hawk, as I promised at the marriage altar. I arranged to meet him, in a short time, out on the mountain, and I intend to do it. Shall I call to him?"

A cry of rage came from Ransom's white lips.

"You shall not go! So help me, God, I will shoot Captain Hawk if I ever set eyes on him. You have got to stay here, I tell you!"

Her face flamed; she took a quick step forward to pass him, but he seized her by the arm, with a restraining grasp.

He struggled to hold her, and she,

aroused to fury by this unexpected interference, summoned all her strength.

The result was that he was thrown to the floor; then she sprang across his prostrate form and bounded out into the darkness.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

A FATHER'S ANGER.

This act of Charlotte but kindled in the heart of her father a fiercer determination. Though overthrown, he was not injured, and she had scarcely gained the darkness of the outer night when he crawled to his feet, and, with blazing eyes, followed her.

Again his manner approached that of one whose mind is unhinged. His eyes brightly burned, his lips, drawn back in a wolfish snarl, showed his broken teeth, his clinched fingers sank the nails cruelly into the palms—in short, his whole attitude was that of a man wrought to some reckless deed of fury.

"I'll kill him," he hissed. "I'll kill them both. She shall never herd with outlaws—she shall never live as the wife of that man!"

His wrath seemed to rouse within him the instincts of a wolf.

Charlotte, when she had gone a short distance, glanced back and saw the lamp still burning, but did not see her father, who was now outside of the cabin and coming toward her. Her resentment was passing, to be followed by a feeling of relenting.

As she turned again, to hurry along, Ransom heard her steps, and then his eyes, made keener by the passions that stirred him, beheld her gliding form.

"She is going to meet him! Ah!"

He soon discovered that she had spoken truly, for, at the foot of the slope, halfway between the cabin and the camp, she met a man.

Because of the darkness, the man's features could not be discerned, but Ransom knew it was none other than Captain Hawk.

They moved away together after a moment's conversation, and Ransom still followed them. He had thrust his right hand into the breast of his coat and clutched a knife there secreted.

It was clear that Captain Hawk had been awaiting her, for they walked on, now, at so rapid a gait that Ransom had much difficulty in keeping them within sight and hearing. It was a feat to tax his power to the utmost, and, under ordinary circumstances, a feat he could not have performed. But his insane rage lent him strength, and gave to his sight and hearing an unwonted keenness.

For more than an hour they pressed on along ledgy trails, with him hanging at their heels like a bloodhound, and at last they came to a lava-ringed hollow—one of those already made familiar to the reader.

Ransom heard Hawk challenge some one in front of a cabin, and soon afterward he beheld a light—the light of a lamp shining through a window.

The sentry was guarding a path or trail, but was close to the cabins, of which there were three or four.

Two or three men roused themselves and came out of the darkness, and, entering the cabin into which Hawk and the woman had gone, a talk of considerable length was held.

The half-crazed father crouched on the rocks but a short distance away, with no other weapon than a knife, and glared at the light with ravening fury, and strained his ears to catch the sounds.

He could not tell what the words were, but he heard laughter now and then, which seemed but to increase his fury.

A little later one of the men came to the door, drawn by an exclamation from the guard; then his cry brought the whole party out on the steps.

Ransom observed that they were looking off toward Shasta, and when he looked in the same direction, he saw the heavens lighted up with a furious glare, as if the camp was being consumed by fire. It was the light thrown on the sky by the burning of the boarding house.

After many conjectures as to what it meant, the outlaws who had come out to greet their chief disappeared; the guard

became invisible, and Captain Hawk and his wife stood on the steps alone, talking. It was a sight to rouse Ransom to a height of vindictive rage.

With bated breath and quivering nerves he crept forward, moving in a semi-circle, that an angle of the house might interpose to hide him from their gaze as he drew near.

Gaining the corner of the house, he lifted the knife, and, with a bellow of rage, sprang for Hawk's breast.

Hawk turned in time to avoid the blow aimed at his heart, and struck the knife out of Ransom's hand. He tried, at the same time, to knock his assailant down, but Ransom rushed in with another cry and caught Hawk about the body.

Instantly there ensued a most terrific combat. Hawk was the younger and stronger man by far, but Ransom's rage so increased his natural strength that he was almost a match for the road-agent captain.

Charlotte gave a shriek of dismay, which, combined with the outcry already made, brought the guard up on the run and the road-agents out of the other cabins.

They found matters going rather hard with Captain Hawk. He had fallen, and in the fall had knocked his head against a stone, thus giving Ransom an advantage.

Ransom had again caught up the knife and was lifting it to plunge it into Hawk's side, when the alert woman tore the knife out of her father's hand, and the outlaws, springing on Ransom, pulled him from Hawk and permitted their leader to stagger to his feet.

In the tumult the door of the cabin had been thrown open, and the light from the lamp, shining now through the doorway, illuminated the scene.

Hawk's face was working with savage rage. He plucked a pistol from his belt and half lifted it.

"Drop that, Captain Hawk!" Charlotte cried, imperiously. "Put down that weapon! You shall not hurt him! He is my father!"

"Who commands in this camp?"

"I do until your natural sense returns. You're angry, now. Wait a few minutes. Recollect he is my father."

Hawk sullenly put up the weapon.

Ransom had ceased to struggle, and now stood, with folded arms, regarding them with bitter scorn.

"Let them kill me. He's already broken my heart. His threats of death don't scare me. He's a scoundrel, whom I detest and defy. Let him do his worst!" was the father's defiance.

Charlotte caught Captain Hawk by the shoulder and gently restrained him.

"He is my father!" she again reminded. "You must not injure him!"

Hawk turned, as if to step away, when the infuriated and reckless father, utterly insane for the time, leaped again on him.

Hawk fell, and Ransom, standing above him, lifted a foot as if he meant to dash it into Hawk's face.

The sight caused Charlotte to forget filial love. She lifted a stool that rested by the door and struck her father with it to the earth.

He went down with a moan, and for a moment she stood panting, her cheeks on fire and her eyes glittering.

But there came a revulsion of feeling. She looked into the ashy face of her parent; then her bosom heaved and the tears came to her eyes.

Captain Hawk was crawling to his feet, muttering maledictions.

He glared at the prostrate form as though he would do it harm.

"Don't touch him, Captain Hawk!" in a voice that quivered. "My God! It is enough that I, his daughter, should do a thing like that. Don't touch him!"

Hawk saw the wisdom of obeying. Her mood was so terrible and strange that it fairly frightened him, and the rough outlaws drew away in a shiver of fear and commiseration.

Ransom stirred, and sat up in a short time.

Then, with a burst of feeling, Charlotte ran to him, took his head in her hands and passionately asked if he were injured.

"Forgive me!" she begged. "I was mad! I was crazy! Forgive me! And, oh! Won't you go away from here? You must! You must!"

Hawk regarded her with an odd expression. Her moods were hard to understand, he thought. Still, he was willing to humor her, and when she requested him to hold her father a prisoner until arrangements could be made to send him back to Shasta, Hawk promised to comply, and Robert Ransom was placed in one of the cabins and guarded.

CHAPTER XLIX.

CONCLUSION.

"Hooroar!"

It was a whispered cry, however, with which Babylon Bill vainly sought to give expression to his feelings.

He had poked his nose over the rim of the lava crest, and saw below the cabins and other indications of the presence of the people he sought.

At his heels were more than a score of the citizens of Shasta, and at his side, having crawled up to the rim with him, lay a Klamath Indian, clothed in Indian rags and dirt.

The Klamath was a well-known figure in Shasta, where he made himself much of a nuisance by hanging about the saloons and guzzling firewater, but he was one of the best trailers on the slope, when sober.

He had been found in that condition the morning after the fire, and having discovered Hop Sing's trail, he had led Babylon Bill and a party of angry men up the slopes of the mountain until this point was gained.

Hop Sing had headed straight for the camp occupied by Captain Hawk and his followers, and it was the view of this camp that brought the whispered "Hooroar!" from Babylon's lips.

A survey of the camp was made; then the forces under Babylon Bill were disposed; that done, with no delay, Babylon led the way over the crest and down the slope into the little valley at a double quick.

The guard fired his rifle and the outlaws tumbled out. Two or three of them were cut down by an answering fire.

Captain Hawk and Charlotte succeeded in putting one of the cabins between themselves and their foes for a few minutes, and so gained the opposite rim and disappeared.

Three outlaws, all that were in fighting trim, took refuge in one of the cabins and made a stubborn resistance, but it was hopeless, and they soon surrendered.

Resolved that Captain Hawk should not escape, Babylon pursued him, assisted by the now alert Klamath.

The trail of Hawk and Charlotte was picked up by the redskin just beyond the environs of the camp, and was followed with persistent skill.

Some of the Shasta people hurried up and joined in the chase.

Hawk, discovering that he was pursued, headed for the upper and rougher slopes.

A more rugged way could not have been passed over by either fugitives or followers.

For two hours the flight and chase continued; then Hawk, putting Charlotte behind him, seemed determined to make a stand.

They were on a ledge above a narrow canyon, down whose depths roared a stream from the still higher altitudes.

Charlotte ran back obediently, and was then seen to throw up her hands and disappear!

A shiver ran through the beholders. They knew, as well as if they had been nearer to witness it fully, that she had fallen from the ledge!

Captain Hawk was seen to stare downward for a moment. Then he turned hesitatingly toward his enemies. He must have recognized the fact that for him there was no escape from capture.

And he chose death!

Their bodies were found in the stream further down not an hour afterward, lying close beside each other on a shelving slope, where they had drifted.

Robert Ransom never recovered from the shock given him by these unhappy occurrences and by the deeds preceding them. He became silent, melancholy and moody, and, drooping day by day, died within six months of the death of his daughter, Charlotte.

The death of Captain Hawk completely broke the power of the Shasta road-raiders. Those captured were promptly punished by imprisonment, though one of them, guilty of the greater crime of murder, was disposed of by Judge Lynch.

Hop Sing disappeared from the scene, and some time afterward it was reliably reported that he had met his death in a fight in the Chinese quarter of San Francisco.

Ruth and Thomas Wagnell, the Six-Shot Spotter, now and for long years husband and wife, make their home in the big city by the Western ocean, where the Shasta Six-Shooter has achieved an enviable reputation as one of the shrewdest and most respected detectives of the Pacific coast.

The boarding house destroyed by fire was rebuilt by the people of Shasta and given to the courageous Irishwoman, whom they learned to love and delighted to honor; and for many and many a day afterward, Babylon Bill amused the guests of the house by relating in his inimitable way the story of the Six-Shot Spotter.

THE END.

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